Tales of Terror

Twenty stories of horror and suspense

Travis McHenry

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SECOND EDITION © 2010
ISBN 978-0-557-26807-8

Cover design by Travis McHenry
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To my sons,
Ashton and Nicholas

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Introduction

Scary stories have been a part of every society since the dawn of man; this is true only because fear is one of those primal, universal emotions that when it's felt, it is very real and intense—that's why it's fun to be scared when we have some measure of control over the stimuli which is affecting us. When we watch a horror movie, if it becomes too intense, we can always turn it off, or walk out of the theater.

Some stories are more frightening than others though, and they may linger in our mind long after we first hear them. These stories are the worst because they spring to the forefront of our imagination when we are at our most vulnerable—a symbol of the unknown lurking just around the dark corner: that stranger knocking on your door when you're home alone at night, or the dark shape moving through the woods as you hurry past the trees.

The first scary story that I consciously remember hearing was one my father told me when I was very young. We were sitting on the couch in the family room, my younger brother on one side of him, me on the other. He told us a popular local ghost story about the old Boy Scout Camp situated in the woods just outside of town.

Apparently there was a man by the name of John Henry who, in the olden days, used to ride the railroad cars like a

hobo. He knew the train schedules fairly well, but to give himself a head start, he would lay his ear against the railroad track and the vibrations of the approaching train would let him know it was on time and he could freely jump aboard.

One night John staggered out to the tracks running where the Boy Scout Camp is today and put his head down on the track, waiting for the midnight train. Unfortunately for John, the train was late that night, and in his inebriated condition, he fell asleep on the train track. At 12:05, the train rocketed by and decapitated John Henry.

The following morning, someone saw John's crushed head in the tracks, but his body was nowhere to be found. A search party was called out and they hunted through the surrounding woods, but despite all their efforts, John's body was never found.

It is said that every night at 12:05, the headless body of John Henry stalks through the woods of the Boy Scout Camp, looking for his head; and he won't rest until he finds it!

I should mention that my dad used to take me and my brother hiking on the trails in and around the Boy Scout Camp. You can imagine how this story changed our perception of the woods. I have retold that story dozens of times, even changing the details to make them relevant for a given place. For example, when I was standing security duty at Naval Air Station Oceana, I started a legend about a gate guard who used the old ammunition rail tracks to tell time because he never carried a watch and was beheaded.

This collection of stories was written by me over the course of several years, starting when I was thirteen with my first short story, *The Curse of Highway 401*. These tales are scary, suspenseful, ironic, and, depending on your personal fears, maybe even terrifying. I hope you enjoy them.

TRAVIS McHENRY

The Curse of Highway 401

The maroon sedan cruised down the long stretch of deserted highway, passing silently through the night towards its driver's final destination. Nights in the desert are cold, dark, and still—especially to a lone traveler without an inclination towards scenic routes. Ted Deswin drove into the darkness of the desert like it was a sanctuary for him. Indifferent to the occasional mesa and cacti, Ted focused on the interminable blackness which always remained just beyond the view of his headlights. Flanked on either side by rolling desert hills, broken only occasionally by a rocky outcropping, the darkness drew Ted further and further away from the life he once knew.

A broken family and a cheating wife were enough to fuel Ted's flight into the abyss. His trip was not one which would be in vain, for he hoped in earnest to find a wonderful

light at the end of his tunnel. That light was supposed to be in California. The beach would serve as the elixir to cure his common cold, a virus which infects so many and ravages the lives it invades.

Extinguishing his last cigarette and eyeing the gas gauge, Ted's thoughts shifted his more immediate needs and pulled his psyche back into solid reality. The last gas station had been passed more than an hour ago, and there were no signs of another oasis appearing anytime soon. The maroon sedan pulled over to the side of the road in search of another pack of cigarettes from the trunk and a few deep breaths of the cool desert air.

It was not a bitterly cold night, but Ted was chilled by the slight breeze which moved across the flat desert terrain. Standing beside the open car door, Ted glanced out over the hills—and by the light of the crescent moon—he made out a peculiar form moving through the night sky, seemingly towards him. After watching this strange shadowy shape for a few moments, a horrible shriek, like the scream of a woman, rang through desert, breaking the serene silence.

Having never been in the desert before, Ted was startled by this shrill sound and instinctively jumped into the driver's seat and slammed his door. Restarting the car and shifting into drive in one fluid motion, Ted peeled out and left the shadowy form gliding through the air over him. Back on the road (and cruising slightly faster than the speed limit) Ted felt uneasy and shifted in his seat, hoping to come upon a gas station, a restaurant, *something*—some sign of civilization. He peeked out the corner of the car window, looking for a glimpse of the shadowy form he had seen earlier.

That horrendous scream had scared Ted pretty badly. What if there really was a woman out there who needed help? Maybe he should turn back? What if there was something out there that wasn't human? All these questions flashed through Ted's mind like billboards for cellular phones. Going back was not an option—Ted was simply too shaken. Forward the path

runs. Away from the unknown sounds, sights, and shapes which plagued the road behind him.

As his speed increased, Ted noticed a faint sound coming from the roof of his car. He quickly turned off the radio and clearly heard a light thumping sound on the roof. Immediately his mind flashed back to the image of that large, dark form soaring through the desert sky and the blood-curdling scream replayed itself in his internal tape loop.

The sound on the roof seemed to get louder as Ted's speed increased. He was sweating now, his fear growing with every dashed yellow line on the highway. Frantically, Ted began to swerve his car from side to side, but the pounding on the roof grew even louder. Whatever it was seemed to be holding on tightly and Ted was going to have to take drastic action to stop the intruder. While Ted's mind raced through the possible identities of the creature on top of his car, he stopped paying attention to the road and missed the curve right in front of him.

Ted slammed into an embankment and the high velocity of his vehicle sent the car end over end twice—landing him broken and bloodied in a shallow ditch. As he laid there, blood pouring from his forehead and chest, clouding his eyes, filling his mouth, Ted waited for an inevitable attack from the creature on top of his car. The attack never came and Ted drifted in and out of consciousness until morning.

Morning in the desert is like nowhere else. As the sun comes up, life seems to return from the ground and everything comes alive. Just before the heat began rising off the pavement, a passing truck noticed Ted's damaged car sitting off the road and stopped to help. A burly man stepped down from the rig and tried to speak to Ted through the smashed driver's side window. The loss of blood coupled with mild exposure prevented Ted from responding, but he heard the trucker's voice through a dark haze. Ted's burly savior hustled back to his truck and radioed for help on the CB.

Thirty minutes later, an ambulance and police car arrived at the scene and pulled Ted's bruised body from the wreck. A saline drip administered by the EMT brought Ted back to consciousness and he weakly raised his head, feeling immense pain throughout his body, but mostly in his face and head. The ambulance crew assured him that—despite the loss of a few teeth—he would make a full recovery after a few days in the hospital.

As the ambulance pulled away from the scene of the accident, Ted glanced out the back door and noticed two policemen trying to detach his luggage from the rack on the roof of his car.

Ted had forgotten all about it.

The Legend of Marrowbrook Woods

About twenty years ago, there was an old woman who lived in a small house deep in Marrowbrook Woods. One night, during a terrible thunderstorm, her house was struck by lightning and burned to the ground with the old woman still inside. They said that her screams could be heard for miles around, through the valleys and hills. As she had no family and lived alone, no one troubled about her demise, and the town paid little attention to the event. However, over the course of several years, the local kids who played in the woods made up stories about how the old woman's ghost still lingered among the trees.

One day, a new family moved into town, bringing with them two young boys. The boys quickly made friends and often played in the woods, but they had never heard the story of the old woman who was rumored to haunt their playground.

After a particularly long day of playing with their friends, the boys started home just as the sun was setting over the horizon. Not wanting to be late for dinner, they decided to take a shortcut through Marrowbrook woods. Halfway through their journey, they encountered an old woman. She was very pale and looked cold, even though it was the middle of summer. The boys thought it might be nice to have a walking companion, so they traveled along with her.

The old lady they had discovered was very pleasant company for the long walk through the woods; she told them stories about when she was young and had played in Marrowbrook Woods. All too soon, the journey was over. When the boys turned to thank the kind old lady for walking them through the woods, she had vanished.

Already late, and a little scared, the boys ran home as quickly as possible. The next day in school, the two boys told the story of the strange old lady to their friends. Laughing, their friends explained the legend of Marrowbrook Woods, and the old lady who burned in the house so many years ago. The next night, the boys were late getting home again, and even though they were scared, they had to take the path through the woods.

When they were halfway through the dark woods, the two boys saw the old lady walking towards them. They were frightened, but decided to walk with her anyway. This time, their journey was not pleasant at all—the old woman kept yelling about how kids were always running through her woods, making noise and bothering her. As the night grew darker, the surrounding woods became ominous, and the old woman's words became fiercer.

The boys never returned home. Their parents called the police but despite several days of searching, there was no trace of the boys or their mysterious walking companion. Rumors of

their disappearance still haunt the town, and some folks say they not only see the old woman, but two little boys walking through the dark paths of Marrowbrook Woods on lonely nights.

All in the Family

Lewis stepped briskly out of his car, grabbing only his hat and the briefcase his company had given him. The fairly new, black artificial leather case contained the newest product from the regionally popular J.D. Catalogue Company. Lewis, in case you haven't guessed, is a door to door salesman.

The case was of moderate weight and he had no trouble carrying it to the front door of the little house he had stopped at. The house's address was unknown to Lewis, as he only stumbled on it while driving through the rough back country of West Virginia. Hoping to meet his weekly quota, Lewis decided to stop and pay the residents a visit.

A bleak porch was the first thing that met his eyes. Upon closer inspection, he noticed badly warped planks serving as the floor boards. The house, from the outside at least, seemed to be in a state of extreme disrepair. Lewis honestly doubted if anyone still lived inside. There were three vehicles parked in the large side yard adjacent to the house, but two of the three cars were without tires, and the one closest to Lewis didn't even have any doors and was profoundly rusted.

Stepping onto the creaky wood porch was an eerie sensation for Lewis. He was used to the solid cement of the city, but the little nature trip proved to be good for his senses. After taking only one step onto the porch of the decaying dwelling, a man who looked to be about forty years of age appeared in the window beside the front door. "What ya'll want?" The gruff man asked.

Lewis stepped closer to the door. "My name is Lewis Dencore, I'm a salesman with the J.D. Catalogue Company."

There was a long pause from the other side of the door, until finally the man responded. "Well, we don't want none." Almost glad to be given the opportunity to withdraw, Lewis began turning to leave when he heard another loud voice from deeper in the house. The voice, while rather rough, was distinctly a woman's.

"Don't you be harassin' them there neighbors! We got problems enough around here without you gittin' 'em all stirred up!"

The door was abruptly flung open and Lewis stood facing a large, haggardly woman. She was quite dirty, and smelt of a combination of some kind of animal and rather rampant body odor. The woman gave a half smile and revealed several missing teeth. Her hair was strewn across her round face, and her overall appearance was totally disgusting. "What in the hail do you want?" The woman shouted, a horrible stench of rot issuing forth from her vile mouth.

Lewis took a step back to get some fresh air before he spoke. "I'm a salesman with the J.D. Catalogue Company, I

was in the area and I thought you might be interested to see a sample of our new product."

The woman dumbly scratched at her head. "Well, I suppose it wouldn't hurt me to look at this here product of yer's, would it?" She smiled grotesquely at Lewis and then stepped back and motioned for him to enter. He stepped into the house carefully—fearful of touching the woman's seemingly decaying body. As Lewis entered, the man who had been at the window approached him.

"My name's Eb, this here's Ruby," the man said gruffly. Taking a full look at Eb, Lewis would have guessed that Eb and Ruby were twins—both were heavily overweight, unkempt, and generally nasty. Despite their horrid appearance, Lewis had to be polite if he hoped to get a sale.

"Nice to meet you both, as I said before, I'm Lewis Dencore." Lewis offered his hand to Eb, but (thankfully) he rejected the motion.

"Git in here and tell us about this product you're yappin' about," Ruby said. The three of them entered the living room where his senses continued to be assaulted with the stench of decay. There was an old brown couch, worn with age and use, sitting against the wall. Opposite was a recliner with a board for the seat and no cushion. On the wall facing the couch was a poorly stuffed deer's head. The eyes were rotted out and Lewis theorized that it was probably the source of the room's horrible smell; although he was sure there were other sources as well.

Taking in his surroundings, Lewis opted to sit on the recliner, not wanting to be on the couch with either of the two hillbillies. After the three of them had settled down, he began his sales pitch. "Now, I'll just run through my presentation and then you folks can get on with your business."

"Oh, no, please take your time. It ain't often we git somebody out here this far into the woods," said Ruby with a certain lovingness.

"Alright, alright. Now, as for the newest product from the J. D. Catalogue Company-" before he could go any further,

a door to what Lewis perceived to be the basement opened and a boy and a girl, both in their late teens came running in.

Ruby got up from the couch and started yelling. "Where in the hail have you two been? Eb and I have been waitin' all damn day fer you two to git home!" The boy and girl were both dressed in the same manner as Eb and Ruby, and their general appearance of filthiness also matched.

"We been out in the barn 'bout near all day," the boy said.

"Yep, Jim Bob an' me wuz-" Before the girl could finish, Ruby grabbed her by the hair and threw her to the floor.

"Have you two been screwin' again?"

Jim Bob smiled proudly, "Yep, we been doin' it all day!"

Ruby shoved him to the floor as well, then turned to Lewis. "I'm sorry, but you know how it is with the kids." She said with a snort, and then continued yelling at the two teens. "You git yer asses upstairs 'til pa comes home fer dinner!" They left the room with their heads down as Lewis slowly stood up.

"Well, I don't want to take up anymore of your people's time. I'll just be going now," he said, moving towards the door.

Eb quickly stood and blocked his way, prohibiting Lewis from leaving. "Ah, why don't you stay fer dinner, Mr. Duncord? We'd sure love to have ya."

Sensing what could turn into a tense situation, Lewis decided to surrender to the group of hicks. "I'd love to," he said, "what are we having?"

Ruby's face lit up, and Eb quietly stepped away from the door. "Great! We'll have ta wait fer pa to git home from huntin'." As she finished her sentence, a door from out of Lewis' sight opened and closed. "Thar he is now. Pa! Come on in here!"

Pa entered the living room dressed in a torn flannel shirt and dirty bib overalls. Slung over his back was a dead deer, its

blood dripping onto the floor. He looked sternly at Lewis. "Who the hail is that?"

Ruby stepped between Pa and Lewis while Eb took the dead deer into the kitchen. "This here's a salesman fer that there J.D. Catalogue. We invited him fer dinner."

Pa crossed to the recliner and sat down. "We? I didn't invite no Yankee boy to eat in my house!"

"Actually, I'm from Atlan-" Lewis started before being cut off.

"Well, I did. Now, you two just git comfortable while I git to makin' the dinner." Ruby left the room, as Pa and Lewis sat facing each other, Pa staring unceasingly at Lewis, who tried his best to avoid eye contact. They continued sitting in silence for several minutes, until the young girl Lewis had seen earlier came downstairs.

"Pa! Yer home!" She said as she ran into the living room and sat on his lap, throwing her arms around his bristly face.

"Hey thar Lila Sue, what did you do today?"

"Me and Jim Bob was out in the barn."

He glared at her and with an ominous tone asked, "What was you two doin'?" The girl backed away a little from his face.

"We wuz, we wuz-"

Pa exploded in anger, "You two wuz screwin' wasn't ya?" He threw her on the floor and started to beat her with a piece of wood from the fireplace. "I'll teach ya to be screwin' somebody besides yer pa!" Upon hearing this, Lewis stood up.

"Wait a minute, wait a minute! Stop hitting her!" He said in desperation.

"When yer in my house, you'll go by my rules," the big man said, moving towards Lewis with an angry look in his eye. Just then, Ruth ran into the room, covered in deer blood.

"Pa! Eb's eatin' up all the deer meat! I tried to stop him, but-" The beastly man stopped her in mid sentence.

"That's okay Ruby, we're gonna have us some Yankee meat tonight."

Jim Bob came downstairs, with an eager look in his eye, "Can I kill him, can I Pa?"

The five family members started closing in on Mr. Lewis Dencore. He backed up to his briefcase, picking it up and holding it in front of him. "You know, I think I forgot to mention what the newest product from the J.D. Catalogue Company is. Wait, why don't I show you inbreeding hillbillies exactly what I'm selling!"

Lewis opened his briefcase and pulled out a semi-automatic submachine gun. "Here's a quick demonstration for you folks." He pointed the barrel of the gun at them. All of the hillbillies backed away slowly, fear replacing their stupidity. Lewis pulled the trigger, hoping to level the entire disgusting family. Once, twice, a third time—but no bullets fired. It was just Lewis' luck; the J.D. Catalogue Company had recently stopped giving their salesmen live rounds. But, that was perfectly alright, there was one group of hillbillies that would be eating very well tonight.

Hair of the Dog that Bit Me

"Ethan, how about this one?"

"Yes, that one's fine too." Ethan Reller and his fiancé Stella were at the animal shelter, looking for a dog. She wanted a dog, but Ethan hated animals. "Could we please just hurry and get out of here," he said impatiently.

"Oh, alright. Sometimes, Ethan, you are impossible. I think I know which one I want." She pointed to a large Saint

Bernard. "That one! That's the one! He's perfect, oh, isn't he just perfect Ethan!"

"Anything you say dear. Let's just pay for it and go."

They took the dog back to Stella's mansion where she and Ethan lived a very comfortable life. Stella came from a rich family and when her parents died in a plane crash, she inherited the family fortune. That was part of the reason that Ethan decided to marry her—despite her vast wealth, there was little about Stella that a potential suitor might find appealing.

At first, the situation with the new dog wasn't too bad. He stayed by Stella's side, and rarely, if ever, did Ethan have to walk or feed it. But several months later, three weeks away from their wedding day, Stella fell down the stairs and was partially paralyzed. She was terrified that Ethan would leave her—she had no idea that he was greedy enough to stay with her no matter what.

"Tell me you won't leave me, Ethan," she said desperately.

"I wouldn't even think of such a thing, Stella! Don't worry. You have to rest and get better so we can finally get married and be happy forever." he said, assuring her.

The downside to Stella's accident was that now Ethan was forced to take care of her dog, which she had named Roger. After only a few days of being forced to care for the dog that he hated so much, the lousy mutt bit him; that was the last straw for Ethan. The next day, he sat down with Stella and forced her to choose between the dog and him.

"It's your choice, either the dog or me. I refuse to take care of that ungrateful beast any longer."

Stella grew concerned and felt that Ethan was ready to leave her. "Oh, now Ethan, is he really that bad?"

"Yes, he is. Roger bit me last night while I was walking him," Ethan said, lifting up his sleeve to show her the bite mark.

She looked at his arm closely and saw the large wound that her dog had left. It was just beginning to scab over, but

there was still some redness and bruising. "Oh no, that looks horrible, you should see a doctor, darling."

Ethan exploded in anger; he could see that she was still not ready to abandon her stupid dog. "You're the one who needs to see a doctor! You have to choose right now! Which one of us do you want in your life?"

"I'm sorry Ethan," Stella said, lowering her head to look at her beloved Roger, "but that dog means everything to me. If you can't live with him, then you can't live with me. Good bye. Please take your things and leave. There will be no wedding."

Several weeks passed, and every day Ethan sat alone in his small apartment planning a way to get Stella back. He looked in the mirror and shouted at himself, "It's no good, she would never take me back! If only that no good dog would disappear, then we could be together again! And I could have my money!" After finishing his diatribe, Ethan noticed a bottle of rat poison sitting on top of his kitchen cupboard. A wry smile formed on his lips as a plan entered his mind.

That night, Ethan went to the deli and bought a pound of steak meat and laced it with the rat poison. His devious plan was ready to take effect. As he drove to Stella's house, he hummed a happy song, thinking about Roger keeling over after eating the poisoned present. "This'll teach him," Ethan said as he knocked on her door.

He was greeted by Stella, still in her wheelchair. "Hello Ethan, is there something I can help you with?"

"Yes, I came to say that I'm sorry," he said, "and to prove it, I brought a little present for the dog." Ethan showed her the steak, still wrapped in deli paper.

"His name is Roger, by the way. Please come in."

Ethan stepped through the door and was greeted by Roger, now a much bigger dog than when Stella first brought him home. "My, he has gotten big, hasn't he?" Bending down, he reluctantly patted the dog on the back and opened the package for Roger to smell. "Here you go big guy," he said as

he put the steak into Roger's food dish. The dog hungrily devoured the present, unaware of its terrible secret.

"Stella, I came to ask if you'll have me back. I love you, and I can't live without you. Even with your beloved Roger in our lives, I want us to be happy."

Pondering Ethan's words, Stella decided that she wanted him back in her life—she was getting older, and didn't want to die alone. "Well, I suppose," she said. Just as Stella spoke, Roger dropped dead on the floor. They hurried into the kitchen and found the dog lying silently beside his food dish. Stella was broken-hearted. "He was my only true friend," she said through a stream of tears.

Ethan knelt down and held her tightly, which was somewhat difficult because of her wheelchair. "Don't worry, I'm here now," he said, a smile creeping on his lips.

Roger was buried in the backyard, and Stella insisted that his grave was close to the house so she could visit with her deceased companion. Several days went by, but she still hadn't gotten over loosing Roger. One night, during dinner, she simply burst into tears for no apparent reason. Ethan responded with cruel insensitivity. "Are you still crying about that stupid dog? He's gone, why don't you just get over it!"

"I wish you wouldn't talk about him like that," she said. With her stupid comments and her constant crying, Ethan knew this situation would never end—she would never get over that wretched dog. Enough was enough, it was time to set things straight and show her who was boss.

"Like what," he said, openly hostile, "like he was a person? He was just a dog Stella, get over it!" His harsh comments brought forth another wave of tears from the bereaved woman.

"Leave Ethan, just get out! I never want to see you again!" she screamed hysterically.

Ethan couldn't believe it. Was she really choosing a dead dog over him? He wasn't perfect, but did her love for Roger really surpass her love for him? "If that's the way you

want it. I'll tell you the truth!" Circling her, he picked up a knife from the table and carried it at his side. "Remember that little present I gave Roger on the night he died? Well, it was laced with rat poison. I killed that stupid dog and I'm glad I did! How do you like that?"

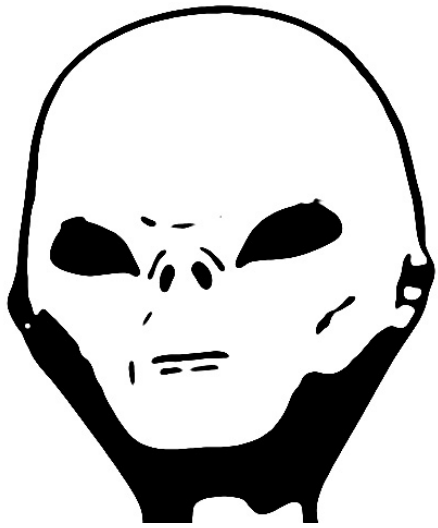
She was horrified. "You're insane! Get away from me," she said as she backed her wheelchair away from him.

Ethan drew closer to Stella, his knife glinting in the dim dining room light. "Come back to me, and we'll be happy forever. I only wanted your money, anyways. Maybe I can still get something from your estate after I kill you. Look on the bright side, now you and Roger can be together again." Just as he began to raise the knife above his head, they heard a strange sound at the back door that made them stop and listen; it sounded like scratching—like a dog.

"Here Roger!" Stella yelled.

The back door burst open and Roger's rotting corpse jumped on Ethan, biting his face and knocking the knife from his hand. Stella watched as Roger devoured her ex-fiancé's body, not caring enough to stop him, but just happy to have her beloved pet back once again. It took the beast several hours, but afterwards, there wasn't a trace of Ethan's body remaining.

These days, Stella and Roger live as they used to, together.



Night of the Abducted

Billy Thomas stepped off the school bus. He was being watched by another young boy standing near the bus stop. No one else seemed to notice that Billy's observer had glowing green eyes. Billy noticed it, because he had seen it before.

He sat up in his bed, dripping with perspiration. There were footsteps in the hallway—they were coming for him. "Hi Billy, you tried to get away, but you can't get away from us because we're everywhere." Those words echoed in his mind. He wanted to stop them, but he couldn't. He had tried in the past, but he just couldn't do it, no one could. Not him, not his parents, no one.

Billy ran from the green-eyed boy as fast as he could, but the boy followed him. When he finally reached his front door-

There were two people standing over him. He didn't want to leave the safety of his bed. The people scared him.

Their faces weren't like his. Their eyes were big and black. The two strange people grabbed him by the wrists and lifted him out of his bed. They each had six fingers, with no knuckles.

He turned around and expected to see the boy right behind him, but his pursuer was nowhere to be found. Billy ran inside and hugged his mother and started to cry.

It didn't help. He opened his mouth to scream, but no sound emitted. The beings led him to his bedroom wall, and he could see their craft in the window. To his surprise, the wall melted around their bodies, allowing him to pass right through.

His mother told him to sit down while she made him some cookies and milk. "What happened Billy?" He couldn't tell her the truth—she wouldn't believe him—so he lied and said that a bully tried to take his lunch money. She looked at him affectionately. "It's okay honey."

He was being carried down a long corridor. It was unlike anything he had ever seen before. A dim yellow light emitted behind the curved walls. In the distance, he could hear screams, and it scared him to think that they were getting louder. The beings that were carrying him stopped walking, one of them touched a panel on the wall and the wall opened, revealing a small, dark room. They set him down in the room. He screamed and a bright red light filled the entire room, which appeared to bother the strange beings.

They were having his favorite meal for dinner—meatloaf. Billy ate away at it hungrily. The memories of previous nights sometimes sprung to the forefront of his mind, but it helped to focus on other things, like eating his favorite dinner. His father yelled at him for eating so fast, prompting his mother to remind him that Billy is "still a growing boy."

"Aaahhhhh!" He screamed in pain. They were doing something to him, something that hurt him badly. No longer was he in that light-filled room. Now the surroundings were more like a hospital. The beings were cutting him open. There were five of them standing over him, each of them holding a different cutting tool.

Billy was standing in the shower, letting the water run over his body. He looked at his chest and saw a small, but noticeable scar. When he ran his fingers over it, feeling the smooth skin, it reminded him of how it had happened.

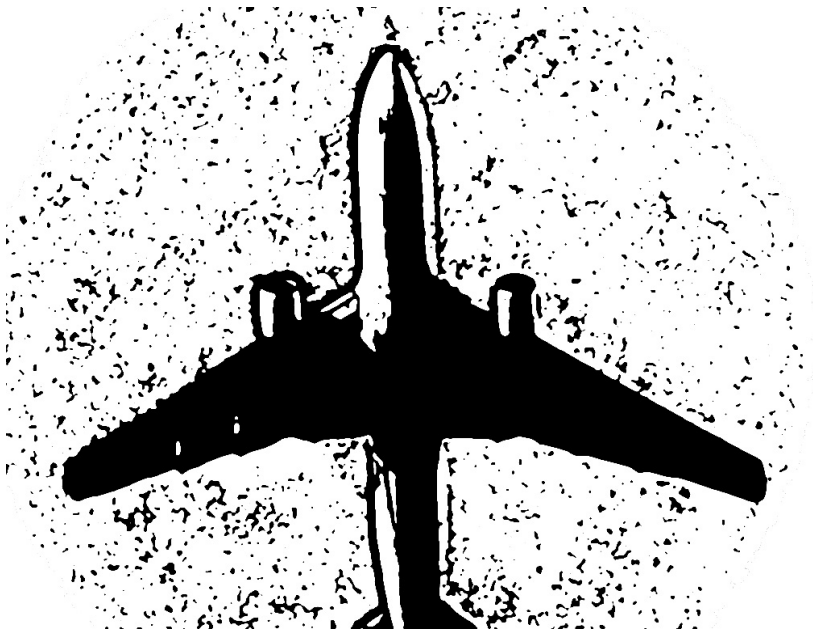
After he had been cut, a tool that emitted a strong beam of light was applied to the cut, and the bleeding stopped instantly. He was no longer in pain—the light beam had stopped that too. One of the beings leaned over him and said something to the others in a language Billy didn't understand, causing all of them to look more closely at Billy's healed cut.

"Billy! Time for bed!" He heard his mother calling, but chose to ignore her. "Billy! Get out of the shower right now!" She repeated, more firmly this time. He listened, and got dressed into his pajamas, entering his bedroom and laying down beneath the covers.

The ship was now taking him home, and he had been returned to the light-filled prison room aboard the craft. Several human people walked past him in a trance-like daze. Occasionally, one of them would stop at his door and look inside, but never for very long.

His mother bent over the edge of the bed and kissed him on the cheek. "Good night honey," she said musically. Billy turned over and, gazing out the window, began to drift off to sleep.

He was no longer in the ship that had abducted him from his home. They had taken him back to his bedroom the same way they had brought him in. When the beings laid him back in his bed, he fell asleep and forgot everything that had happened.



Flight 237

Tom Cremming was walking slowly through the airplane terminal when a woman's voice came over the loud-speaker. "Flight 237, Los Angeles to Boston, now boarding." He stepped up to the lady on the boarding ramp and handed her his ticket. "Thank you sir, have a nice flight," she said cordially.

Tom walked onto the plane and found his seat by the window. A fat man and an old woman were in the seats beside him. The fat man turned and blew a thick puff of cigar smoke in Tom's face. "Hope you don't mind cigar smoke," the fat man said in a throaty voice.

"That's okay," Tom replied, "the no-smoking light is on." With that, the fat man extinguished the cigar and turned to talk to the old lady next to him.

"Ladies and gentlemen, this is your captain speaking. Please remain seated with your seatbelts fastened until after takeoff." Tom buckled his seatbelt and looked out the window, watching the plane leave the ground. He noticed that there was smoke coming from the engine, and he tried to alert the flight attendants, but it was too late—the plane blew up in a fiery wreck, still moving down the runway.

Tom woke up screaming.

It was only a dream.

He picked up the phone and dialed his brother's number. "Hal sorry to call you so late."

Hal had been sleeping for hours, but his brother never seemed to care about the time difference. Moving to Boston was one of the finest moves Hal had made, although his family didn't totally support it, mostly because it would put him on the other side of the country and far away from them. His law practice was doing better in Boston than it had in Los Angeles, and he couldn't see a reason to return, other than to stop his bother's late-night phone calls.

"Tom, it's two in the morning," he said groggily.

"I know, I know, but I had another dream again. It seemed so real Hal, you wouldn't believe it."

"Listen Tom," Hal said, cutting him off, "before my first flight, I had all kinds of bad dreams about the plane crashing. This sort of thing is normal. You have nothing to worry about." Hal thought it was very strange that his brother had never been in a plane before, owning, he claimed, to his fear of the plane crashing.

Tom could tell that Hal was tired, so he let his older brother go back to sleep. "Alright, goodnight," he said as he hung up the phone and went out to the kitchen to make himself a sandwich. He sat down and began to take a bite when he noticed an ad in the paper that read:

National Charter Buses
Across the state, or across the country
We can get you there safely

He picked up the phone again and dialed the 1-800 number. A woman answered and asked for the details of his trip. They had a bus leaving for the east coast the day after his scheduled flight, and it would take nearly two days to make the trip. Tom hung up the phone, relieved that his horrible dream wouldn't come true, and he wouldn't have to get on a plane.

The bus terminal was fairly busy when Tom arrived to begin his trip across the country. Two days in a bus may not have been most people's idea of a vacation, but as long as it kept him out of a plane, it was good enough for Tom. Just as people began boarding the bus, his cell phone rang; it was his brother. "What is it Hal?" Tom said as he stepped aside to let others get on.

"Tom, the flight, 237, the one you were going to take, it just crashed on the runway during take off, and everyone died!" Hal was frantic, but his words actually grounded Tom in reality. There was the underlying fear that fate would find a way to catch up with him in the end, but now that the plane had crashed, Tom knew he was safe.

"That's terrible Hal. I guess those dreams I was having weren't so ordinary, were they?"

"No, I guess not. You were right little brother."

"I'm about to board the bus, can I let you go? I'll call you a little later, once we get rolling, okay." With that, he ended the call and boarded the bus, feeling even better then before about taking this trip.

Once inside the bus, he looked around and found an empty seat. As he made his way back to the center of the bus, the driver called for any last minute passengers to board. Tom sat back in the nicely cushioned seat and relaxed a little, looking out the window and watching the activity of the bus terminal.

He felt the push of another person next to him. Tom turned and saw that a fat man had taken the empty seat to the left of him. As the driver closed the door and the bus pulled out of the terminal, the fat man blew a thick puff of cigar smoke into Tom's face.

"Hope you don't mind cigar smoke," the fat man said as he broke out in a throaty laughter.

The Crypt of Nosferatu

As I kissed my beloved wife Claudia goodbye, I climbed into the small, horse-drawn carriage that would take me to the train station. I knew that my leaving her, if only for a fortnight, would tear her apart. As we drove away, I watched her sobbing into her handkerchief through the back window of my carriage.

In the train station, the conductor took my ticket and told me to wait in the lobby until all the passengers had left the incoming train. I sat on one of the long wooden benches in the noisy terminal, when I noticed a man, dressed entirely in black, watching me. He followed my every move, not caring whether or not I took notice of him. While it was not known to me at

the time, I would later make an acquaintance of this strange man.

On the other side of the hemisphere, my colleagues were busy exhuming the graves of several Romanian princes that had been buried during the 15th century. I had received a communication three days ago, telling me of the most recent discoveries. The letter told me none of the details, but simply requested my presence at the dig site. I told my wife that I would return in two weeks time to share with her our newborn son, who had still been in the hospital when I began my journey.

As I boarded the train, the man who had been following me became lost in the crowd—whoever he may have been, he was of no consequence to me now. The attendant showed me to my seat and handed me a note. "From your digging company," he told me. I thanked him and opened the yellow envelope. It read as follows:

Quincy, you must come at once, many of the crewmen are dying. Since the discovery of the new grave, we have lost twelve workers to what the natives call Nosferatu. What it means, I do not know. Please, come quick.

I must confess that after reading this, I became quite worried; my wife was expecting me back in two weeks, and if I were to die on this journey, then she and my infant son might never recover from the shock of it. Passing the thought from my mind, I decided simply to take caution and stay away from this *Nosferatu*, whatever it might be.

When I stepped off the train, we were in a part of Romania known as Wallachia. In order to reach my destination, I had to go by carriage deep into the Carpathian Mountains. The ride to the town in which I was to meet the head of my crew was a pleasant one. I sat and stared out the window at the dark mountains against the bright moon, now beginning to dim against the rising sun. As the sky grew lighter, I though of my dearest Claudia. On the train, I had written a letter and sent it back to her.

The carriage came to a slow stop and I quickly gathered my things, which had become somewhat jarred around the carriage interior as I slept. The door opened and I carefully stepped out.

A man, Doctor Feldstein, the head archaeologist on the digging crew, was on hand to greet me. He took me inside the small tavern at which we had stopped. Once inside, he told me of the problem. "Did you get my letter," he inquired as he poured a glass of wine for me. I pulled the letter from my left breast pocked and gave it to him.

"Yes, what is this Nosferatu?"

He looked at the letter and then at me. "It is the native word for vampire."

I sat there for a moment, not knowing what to believe. "Vampire, surely you jest?"

The doctor leaned forward and lowered his voice. "There are many things that these people believe. Not all of them are superstitions." As he spoke, several of the men in the tavern began to look at us. The doctor stood up from his chair. "We must go now." With that, I followed him out the door.

Outside, there was a small group of people standing in front of the carriage. They all spoke Romanian, which I could not understand, but the doctor appeared to be quite fluent. He exchanged words with the group for several moments. The villagers appeared to be getting angry, but the doctor proceeded in the argument. When they were finished, the doctor opened the door to the carriage and gestured for me to enter.

I climbed in and saw one of the women hand the doctor a cross. She then blessed him and allowed him to enter the carriage beside me. "Village superstitions," he said. I could see that the doctor was slightly perturbed, but the cross that the woman had given him now dangled from his neck.

The carriage started moving, and the doctor pulled a map from his briefcase and flattened it out on the seat. He explained that after a four hour trip through the Carpathian Mountains, we would reach an area known as Borgo Pass, deep

in the province of Transylvania. "There is a royal burial chamber about an hour away from the Pass, it's there that we've made our latest find."

After stopping briefly at Borgo Pass to change carriages, we continued down to the bank of the Arges River, where the ruined castle of the Romanian prince Vlad Tepes III loomed over the valley, a once-powerful fortress high on the mountain top. Once we were past Borgo, the road became extremely rocky, and the ride was even more unpleasant than before. On more than one occasion, the doctor became ill from the excessive rattling of the carriage.

Finally, at half-past four, we reached the Arges River. The work crew could be seen at the top of the mountain, digging alongside the remnants of the castle. "There it is Quincy, the castle of Vlad Tepes, better known to history as Vlad the Impaler." The doctor stepped out of the carriage and started walking toward the group of workers. I struggled to catch up with him, but the speed of his pace over the rocky terrain was difficult to match.

"Tell me Doctor Feldstein, what is Nosferatu, is it real?"

He continued walking, not hearing my question. Still, I struggled to keep up, but still his speed grew. "Doctor Feldstein! Answer my question!" Finally, he stopped and turned.

"Do you see that?" He raised a pointed finger in the direction behind me. I turned slowly, to rest my eyes on the setting sun. "Yes," he said, "it is real." Asking no more questions, and hesitating no longer, I followed him at an even pace to the excavation site.

The climb up the hill was not an easy one. A few of the workers had to help us up the craggy, rock studded hill. As the sun set in the mountains, the workers put down their tools and went back down the mountain, leaving me and the doctor alone. While we walked through the crumbling castle, he explained to me that the natives fear the night. "They run for their houses

and lock their doors at sunset," he told me. In my opinion, he was the one who was afraid.

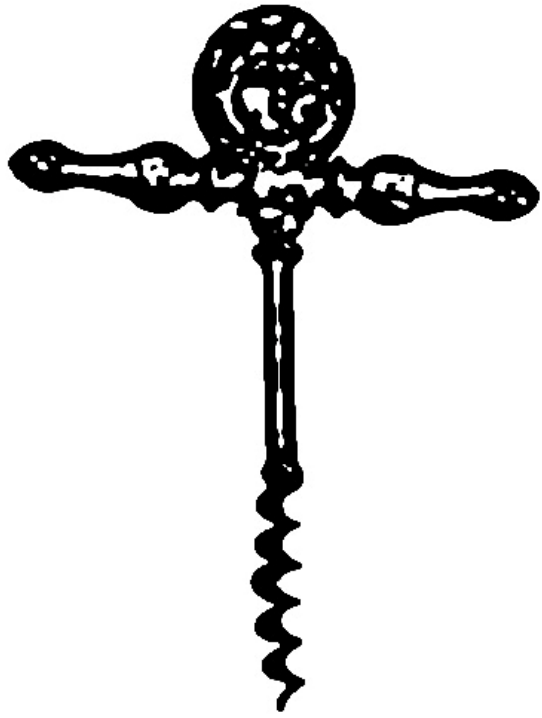
We stood over the recently excavated grave site in the basement of the crumbling castle, seeing only by the light of the lantern. The body was already gone, in addition to many of the treasure items that had been buried with the great prince. The doctor informed me that the body was already on a boat to England to be examined by our scientists at a major museum in London—while the artifacts found in the tomb were *en route* to our office in Germany.

Mysteriously, once the ancient prince's body left the country of Romania, the deaths among our workers stopped and the digging resumed to normal; and I was able to return to my wife and newborn son in Bremen where I would be able to take part in the study of the grave artifacts that were found at the castle. There is, however, more to the story that is not known to me.

When the cargo ship reached England, the crate that carried the body of the long-deceased Romanian prince was found to be empty. It was assumed that unscrupulous ship hands had done away with the corpse out of fear. They were questioned, and the entire ship was searched from bow to stern, but all that was found was a dead stowaway.

It was raining in London that night, as the Nosferatu, Vlad Dracula, walked down the dark street. On one of the side streets, there was a young girl who was trying to keep warm by a small fire. Dracula quietly stepped behind her. His hands were around her throat when she turned and faced him. "What do you want mister?" The girl was met by Dracula's hypnotic gaze.

"Remember nothing," he said as he slipped his mouth over her bare neck, and began to drink.



Fortitude in Murder

There was a light breeze as Walter Remington walked hurriedly through the moonlit park. He wanted to get home to his wife before midnight, and he raised the gold watch given to him by his father to note the time. "Eleven twenty five, I can still make it home," he whispered to himself.

As he continued walking, a man dressed in black ran into him. The man started to mumble something, but instead, picked up a small booklet that he had clumsily dropped on the ground. He handed the booklet to Walter and in a raspy voice said, "Take this to your wife quickly." The man then fell impetuously into Walter's arms, and without another word,

died. The shock of someone suddenly dying in his arms caused Walter to callously throw the dead man on the ground.

Walter gently opened the small book that the man had bestowed upon him. There were only a few names and addresses in it. He leaned over to see if the dead man had just passed out, or if he was really dead. The man couldn't have been too dead, because from beneath Walter's feet, the mysterious man had disappeared into the night. A befuddled Walter spent the next few minutes looking behind bushes and trees to see if the man had tried to crawl away, but then died again somewhere.

Just then he heard the great chime of the old clock tower, telling him that it was midnight. "Terrific! Just terrific, now I'm late!" Walter said as he slid the book into his coat pocket and ran to the street corner to flag down a cab. When the cab stopped at his apartment, he stepped up on the curb, leaned on the car window and paid the cabbie. Arriving on his floor, he noticed that the door to his apartment was slightly ajar; he was immediately concerned, and ran into the living room shouting for his wife.

"Sally! Sally! Are you here? Is everything alright?" Walter entered the bedroom, and found Sally sprawled on the floor, arms and legs akimbo in an unnatural position. He bent down and turned her over. There was a silver corkscrew pushed all the way into her forehead. Blood was running down her face. At the sight of his dead wife, he screamed and fell backwards against the bed.

"Mister Remington, what's the matter?" The person at the bedroom door was an old lady who lived down the hall from Walter. She had heard him scream and like a nosy neighbor, came running to investigate.

"I- I don't know. When I got here, she was like this," Walter stammered. The old woman started at him, and then looked at the body. The sight of the corkscrew was too much for her—she let out a bloodcurdling scream as her eyes lit up with terror. The sound of her screams was cut short by the

sound of her body hitting the floor. Walter crawled over to her side and checked her pulse, listening for a heart beat. "She's had a heart attack! This can't be happening! This can't be happening!" he kept screaming over and over.

The police sirens outside his window didn't provide any additional comfort. He looked at his hands which were stained with his wife's blood and quickly realized how the situation appeared. The two policemen who had been sent over to investigate the screaming found Walter in the bathroom trying to wash his hands and then discovered the bodies of the two women on the bedroom floor.

It took about two seconds for the policemen to draw their revolvers and point them fixedly at Walter's cranium. "Don't you make a move sonny," one of the police officers shouted. As one policeman read Walter his rights, the other helped restrain the crowd of people who had gathered outside the door of the apartment.

Back at the station, a detective questioned Walter about the dead bodies. "I told you, I found my wife dead when I got home," he tried to explain; but his hands were shaking, and the detective didn't believe him.

"What about the old lady from down the hall?" he asked.

"She had a heart attack when she saw the body!" The cops just weren't buying it, and they placed him in a holding cell until they could sort out the details of what they believed was a double homicide.

The only other person in the prison cell was a big guy who kept staring at him. Walter had called his friend Jacob earlier and hopefully, he could take care of the legal quandary in which he now found himself. When the police searched him, they didn't take the book he had been handed by the "dead guy" in the park. He leafed through the book again, but found nothing that could help him.

Jacob came to visit him the next day and asked about potential enemies. Walter had none that he knew of. "Listen Walt," Jacob said, probing deeper, "did you owe money to

anyone, or cross the wrong person lately?" Walter always borrowed money from guys at the track, but one really stood out in his mind.

"There as this one guy at the track, he was a big guy who asked me if I wanted to take out a small loan. I was broke, so I said sure. He gave me three weeks to pay him back. It's been five months, but I haven't been able to find him at the track to give him his money back."

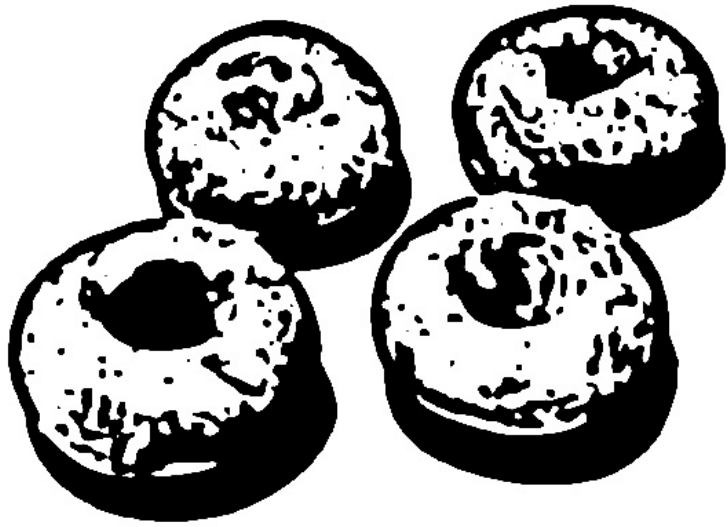
Jacob was becoming excited—he had a disreputable character to hand to the police in place of his client. "If I got you a picture," Jacob asked, "could you identify him?" After some discussion with the detective, they allowed Walter to search through a book of mug shots.

They sat looking at the pictures when Walter found the guy he was looking for: Andy Dickerson, a.k.a. Corkscrew Andy. To Walter's surprise, he saw another face he knew. There, just two rows below Andy's was a picture of the man who had bumped into Walter that night in the park. "That's Andy's only known accomplice, Fred J. Farley," the detective informed them.

Now the police began to formulate a theory about what had happened that night: while Fred Farley distracted Walter in the park, Andy broke into his apartment and murdered his wife; Andy had just enough time to get out of the building before Walter returned to find Sally dead in the bedroom. The coroner confirmed that the old lady had, in fact, died of a heart attack, further exonerating Walter. The police picked up both Andy and his accomplice, and set Walter free.

It was the perfect crime.

Well, almost.



A Baker's Dozen

There once was a baker who made all sorts of yummy treats for the people of the town. One day, a little boy went to the baker and began to call him nasty names. "Little boy, why do you call me such names?" the kindly baker asked.

"Because I hate your cheese strudel," the little boy replied.

The baker, who was not very smart, took a bottle of rat poison and spread its contents on a strudel. "Here little boy, this strudel is free." The little boy took the strudel and ate it. As soon as the poison touched his lips, he turned green and died.

Having a dead little boy in the shop would be bad for business, so the baker took the body and buried him behind the bakery. "That will certainly teach him," chuckled the baker to

himself as he dug. After that, the baker decided to teach the whole town a lesson, and he began poisoning all of his baked goods. As the customers died one after another, he continued burying them behind the bakery. After a few days of this, he got tired of digging and stopped killing people.

One night when the baker was almost asleep in his little bedroom above the bakery, he heard voices coming from downstairs. At first, he thought it was some kids trying to scare him. The baker made some poisoned pastries and walked outside, prepared to give them to the little kiddies. As he opened the back door of the bakery, he noticed that all of the holes he had used to bury his victims had been dug up.

Terrified that the poor people he had killed were returning from the grave to seek revenge, the baker eagerly gobbled up all of the poisoned pastries and died. Just as the baker's body hit the ground, a black and white dog came up from one of the holes. In his mouth was a bone.

A Sticky Situation

Gary Shints was outside on a cool fall day, walking among the rows of maple trees adjacent to his family's New England home. The Shints family was in the syrup business, and had been ever since his great-grandfather perfected the secret family recipe that made their maple syrup famous. The chill in the air betrayed the month—it usually didn't get cold until late October—but the good weather had turned south early this year, and now in mid-September he needed a jacket to stay warm.

The red flannel coat was a snug fit on Gary's rotund body. He had just turned 21 and was experiencing what his parent's called the "college slow down," when his body's metabolism would slow and cause him to gain weight if he didn't exercise more often. The phrase was somewhat a misnomer, as Gary had no interest in attending college; he was simply content to live out his days at home, helping mom and

dad with the family business. Gary's constant exposure to the sweet maple syrup didn't help his weight problem, and neither did his lazy refusal to engage in physical activity. It just didn't make sense, he figured, to do work when you didn't have to.

It was on such a fall day as this that Gary's father approached him and began to question him about the possibility of attending college the following spring. The conversation quickly developed into an argument, and Gary became so angry that he picked up a small hatchet and without thinking, killed his father. After chopping his victim three times in the head, Gary dropped the hatchet and ran into the house to clean the blood off of his sausage-like fingers.

Once inside, he was confronted by his mother, who had no idea what had just transpired between her son and her husband. The blood on Gary's shirt, hands, and face startled her, prompting a stream of questions. Sensing he was backed into a corner, Gary grabbed a French chef knife from the kitchen counter and mindlessly stabbed his mother in the chest over and over again until she lay dead on the floor in a pool of her own blood.

Having committed two heinous acts of unprovoked murder, Gary began to panic. Tears streamed down his pudgy face as he lost all ability to engage in rational thought. He needed a plan of action to hide the bodies before someone stumbled upon the macabre scene that was the result of years of introverted feelings and misplaced rage. The early cold weather made the ground too hard to dig, so he would have to find another place to dispose of his parents—the basement, the attic, and the barn were all bad ideas—anyone coming to look for his mom and dad might stumble upon their mangled corpses.

While searching through the barn, Gary set his eyes on the perfect place to store the bodies of his victims until the ground thawed the following spring: there, amidst the machinery used in processing the maple syrup, was a large vat filled with this year's harvest, waiting to be bottled and sold at the market. He took his parent's bodies and threw them into the

vat one at a time, being careful not to slip into the vat himself. Once his grisly task was finished, Gary returned to the house and cleaned up the remaining evidence of his crime.

Months passed by, the police came and went, and no one ever knew what really happened to the elder members of the Shints family. Gary got a life insurance check and lived comfortably in his parent's home, occasionally splurging on a bowling game or two in town. However, because of his unlikely choice for a tomb, he was unable to sell any of the famous Shints maple syrup and the money eventually ran out.

Around the month of April, when the ground finally started to thaw, Gary decided to pull the corpses out of their sticky resting place so he could make money with the family business again.

On a dark, rainy night, the portly murderer climbed on top of the giant maple syrup vat that had served as the tomb for his parent's bodies. Opening the lid, Gary peered in and tried to locate the remains amidst the dark liquid. Suddenly, his father's body rose to the top and Gary was face to face with the butchered carcass of Mr. Shints. The ghastly sight so shocked him that he slipped and fell into the vat, accidentally bringing the lid down on his head as he grasped for a hand-hold.

Lying unconscious inside the vat of his family's pride, Gary quickly drowned as he sunk to the bottom, coming to a horrific end beside the syrup-cured bodies of his parents.

Stupid Bingo

Once there was a town called Deldsville. It was a small town with only a few hundred people and very few crimes. As often happens with small towns, there occurred a horrible, high profile crime—a series of murders so brutal that, despite the best efforts of the townspeople, they will never be forgotten.

It began when Sam, the town bingo announcer was murdered in cold blood while traveling home after a game one night. Bingo was Deldsville's chief pastime, so the murder hit the town especially hard. On November 18th, the investigation began, and on November 18th it ended. There was not a single soul in Deldsville that would ever even *think* of killing Sam, let alone actually carry the act through to its bloody conclusion.

The police and the townsfolk accepted the idea of Sam committing suicide. After several weeks, there was a new bingo announcer, and life was back to normal.

Strangely, that's when more people started turning up dead. Each night, right after bingo, one of the game's winners would be found the next morning horribly butchered. No one knew who could be killing the bingo winners, but people didn't stop playing their beloved game—they just put their faith in the local police. The local police, however, were less than competent.

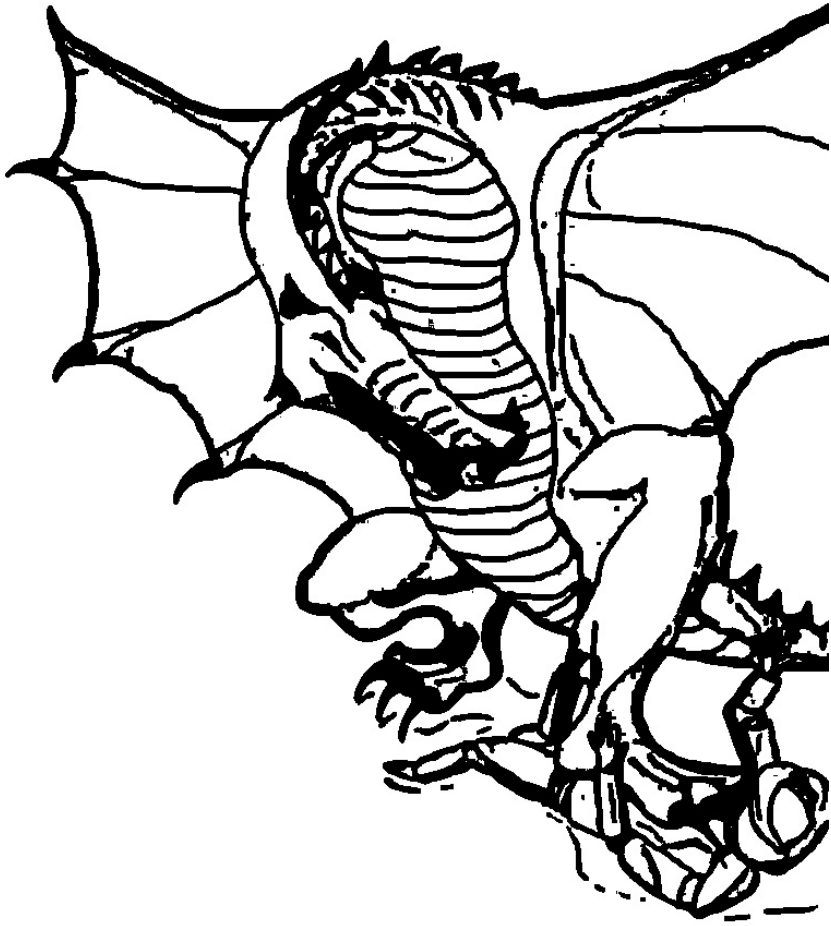
After several days of following dead leads, they decided to actually attend some of the bingo games. It seemed a logical conclusion that the killer was stalking the bingo winners during the nightly games. That night, two plainclothes policemen sat in the bingo hall, playing along with everyone from the town. "N-17," the announcer yelled through the loudspeaker.

All of a sudden, a man stood up, frantically shouting, "Bingo! I have a bingo!" The next morning, he was found dead in the town park. His throat had been torn out, and there were gallons of blood covering the ground. There had been five winners at the game that night, but this man was the only one that was killed. After two more weeks of this, and eight more murders, the police finally made their break. Whenever someone got a bingo with N-17 in it, that person was killed. Some of the townspeople thought it was Sam, taking revenge. After all, November 17th was the day of his death, and now he would make the bingo players remember him forever with this series of grisly murders. It was a little far fetched, but it was the only lead the police had.

The very next night, when the bingo announcer called out N-17, one of the plainclothes policemen shouted "Bingo!" On his way home through the dark alleys of Deldsville, the officer heard very faint footsteps behind him. When he neared his house, the officer drew his revolver and prepared to shoot and kill whoever was following him.

As he turned around, he came nose to nose with Sam's rotting, decomposing face and screamed in terror. "You're the one who killed me, so you're the last to die," Sam said, reaching out to grab the officer who stood motionless with shock. "I had to lure you onto the street by yourself so I could kill you like you killed me. I wouldn't help you cheat at bingo, and now you're-" Sam's rotted jaw fell to the ground before he could finish the sentence. The corpse raised a slimy hand and wrapped it around the officer's throat, squeezing until no trace of life remained. Once his grisly task was finished, Sam fell to the ground, able to rest in peace at last.

The townspeople happened upon the murder scene the following morning, and were baffled by the scene. Sam's decomposed corpse was lying next to the body of a police officer who was rumored throughout the town to be crooked. They were left to their speculations, trying to push the unthinkable from their minds, and concentrate on the bingo games which continue in Deldsville to this day.



The Epic Story of Hugh

Ages ago, in the Kingdom of Lightenham, there was a great warrior named Eric who fought against a countless number of demons and monsters and many stories were written of him—until the day when he died. On the day that Eric was buried, all the evil creatures in Lightenham came forth from the

mountains, swamps, and deserts to ravage the countryside. This demonic horde was led by their horrible king, a cruel monster named Moulech. Under his terrible rule, monsters of every kind terrorized travelers and destroyed cities.

King Peter, who one day inherited the throne of Lightenham, was weary of the monsters and decided to bring down Moulech and end the reign of evil in his kingdom. Every warrior who came to fight Moulech was killed even before he could find the demon king's secluded castle. Peter was in great distress, and his kingdom was running out of warriors. He had lost all hope for the safety and security of Lightenham. During one of his depressed moments, the king's good pet Chub Toad offered him some advice.

"King Peter," he croaked, "send for the descendant of Eric to come and fight the monsters. While none other can complete the task, a warrior such as he will have no problems." Months later, the warrior Hugh came before the royal throne at Lightenham castle. When Peter saw Hugh, he was greatly dismayed—the supposedly great warrior was clothed only in shabby leather garments, with no shield or sword at his side.

"Where is your armor?" asked the King.

Looking briefly to the ground, and then holding his head high, Hugh faced the king and explained his condition. "My armor and weapons were lost on the voyage here. Your kingdom is surrounded by thousands of monsters and demons, in fighting them, everything I had was destroyed."

The king shook his head and turned to Chub Toad. Always wise and helpful, the large toad offered his advice. "The descendant of Eric can defeat any monster with his hands, such a warrior as this has no need for weapons or armor." Peter agreed.

Turning back to Hugh, King Peter announced a difficult task. "For you, I propose a test. If you can rescue my daughter from the grip of the dragon of the Southern Swamp, then I will find you worthy to fight the mighty Moulech." Without any

thought, Hugh accepted the challenge and was dismissed by the king.

After leaving the royal court, Hugh walked to the nearby town of Bentony where he found a quaint inn. At the inn, he ordered ale and sat to ponder his task. A man who wore cheaply made armor sat next to him and ordered a drink. "What is it that bothers you," the man asked.

Hugh turned to the soldier and said, "Who is it that wears such cheap armor to question my manner?"

The soldier set down his drink and addressed Hugh. "I am a soldier of the King of Lightenham, a proud and noble warrior."

Laughing, Hugh replied "Now I see why Peter sent for me to save his kingdom." At these words, the soldier sank back in his chair and stared with amazement.

Choosing his words carefully, he said "The descendant of Eric. How does one such as you hope to fight an enemy such as Moulech with no armor and no weapon?"

Hugh took another drink of ale. "I will find a local armorer and buy myself an expensive sword and a powerful suit of armor." Through the course of ales and a meal, the soldier explained that the only armor store in the entire kingdom was in the town of Canterbury; but the remote town was guarded by a powerful golem who was ordered by Moulech to starve the people to death so he could posses their weapons with no effort. Hugh gave the man a gold piece and quickly returned to the royal castle.

When he arrived, Chub Toad greeted him at the door. "To defeat the golem," he explained, "you must use a weapon of music." Hugh did not sing, nor did he play any instruments. "Neither voice, nor skill be needed to put the mighty golem to rest. All that is required to defeat him is a breath of air into a magic flute from the town of Kont."

That night, Hugh traveled to Kont and asked the townspeople about the location of the magic flute. No one seemed to know what he was talking about. Just as he was

beginning to curse the bloated toad, an old woman sitting beside a fountain muttered a short song that Hugh overheard. "A flute of the best, here doth rest, seven steps below the fountain," she sang in a low voice. Hugh listened to her repeat this poem and then walked seven steps in every direction around the fountain. At seven steps south, he dug under the ground and found an old flute made of copper. When Hugh had the instrument in his hand, the woman looked up and whispered to him, "Golem is afraid of the music of the flute, so 'tis said."

With that, Hugh left Kont and made his way to the town of Canterbury. Upon approaching the town, Hugh could see a great stone wall, hundreds of feet high, with only one gap in the great bricks. Drawing closer to the wall, he found that a huge pile of clay lay blocking the gap, half as high as the wall itself. As Hugh drew closer to the pile, it suddenly came to life. He backed away from the rising clay and watched as two arms and two legs formed out of the shapeless mass. "Your life will end," a loud voice boomed from the mass, which began to resemble a very large man. A face formed and the giant golem spoke further. "Say a prayer to the God you worship and meet my fury!"

Before the clay giant could go further, Hugh took out the copper flute and blew it strongly. The great golem covered the sides of his head as beautiful music was released from the flute. He closed his oversized eyes and fell to the ground, causing the walls surrounding Canterbury to fall shattering around him. Hugh ran over the body of the sleeping golem and entered the town to much celebration.

The people of Canterbury came rushing to greet Hugh as he climbed down from the Golem's body. Once inside the great city, Hugh was given many rewards for his heroic deed: the townspeople gave him a sword made of iron and covered with the scales of a dragon; the armorer, generally regarded as the finest in all the world, bestowed upon Hugh a suit of armor containing special herbs in the lining that could replenish his health with little effort. Hugh accepted the gifts and left the

people of Canterbury, giving them the body of the golem to repair their buildings.

Back at Lightenham castle, King Peter told Hugh that the dragon of the Southern Swamp was the pet of Moulech and was powerful enough to wipe out 500 of the king's finest men. "I will do with one sword what 500 men could not do with a thousand," Hugh told the king. Before he left, Chub Toad gave Hugh an ancient fossilized dragon scale that was rumored to be from the very first dragon. He tucked the charm into his pocket and departed for the Southern Swamp.

Upon reaching the outskirts of the swamp, a skeleton greeted Hugh with a warning to go no further. The reanimated bones waved a broken sword and told him that it was time to join the evil army of Moulech. Hugh shook off the threat and crushed the skeleton with one blow from his iron sword. Dust and broken bones carpeted Hugh's steps as he walked deeper and deeper into the swamp.

In the center of the foreboding swamp, there was a dark pit that sunk into the ground; at the bottom Princess Gabriel laid in wait for Hugh to rescue her. As he started to climb down into the darkness, a great roar came from behind him. A gigantic green dragon emerged from the trees of the swamp, breathing flames and tearing trees from their roots. "Who dares enter my swamp," he roared with fire-coated breath.

"I am Hugh, the descendant of Eric, sent to slay the evil Moulech and any monster that stands in my path. Now I have come to rescue the princess who lies captive at the bottom of this dreadful pit, and I will not be prevented from completing my task."

The dragon let out a laugh that toppled trees and set birds flying overhead on fire. Hugh charged at the dragon, his sword outstretched, but the dragon knocked him to the ground, and flung his sword into the pit. "Fight me now, descendant of Eric!" Hugh reached into his pocket and drew out the dragon scale that Chub Toad had given him.

"You want a fight, well I'll give you one, you flame-breathing reptile!" With that, Hugh jumped on the neck of the dragon and gripped the beast with all of his strength. "Chew on this!" He said as he crammed the fossilized dragon scale down the beast's mouth. The dragon fell to the ground and coughed smoke out of his mouth. "How did you like the taste of that," Hugh asked as the dragon died a long and painful death. The difficult part of his task complete, he started into the deep pit. At the bottom, Princess Gabriel was sitting in a corner. After thanking him a thousand times, they climbed out of the pit and returned to the castle.

Entering the gates, Hugh was greeted by the subjects of Lightenham as they cheered his name and threw coins at his feet. He proudly walked through the crowd bearing Gabriel on his shoulder. Chub Toad led them into Peter's throne room, where Hugh was presented with a trove of gifts from the royal treasury. First, a servant brought in a wagon filled with gold and gems. Then, a silver harp which could lure enemies was laid at his feet. Following that, a golden ring and a book of spells were bestowed upon him. The blacksmith from Canterbury brought a shield—made from thick layers of silver pressed together—and a compass, and gave them both to Hugh.

Finally, the king reached into a large treasure chest and gave Hugh an old stone tablet. The tablet contained the final words of his ancestor, Eric. "Any man who can do what you have done must truly be a descendant of the greatest warrior ever to roam my kingdom."

Hugh took the tablet and all his gifts to the inn at Bentony. The next morning he would go to Riddaltar to try and get information about the location of Moulech's castle. While he was sleeping, Princess Gabriel came to his room and woke him. They talked for a few moments of the battle with the dragon, after which, Hugh claimed his reward.

That morning, they returned to the castle to tell Peter that when Moulech was killed they would be married; but much to their horror they found the royal castle in ruins. Dead

citizens littered the streets—there was debris and destruction everywhere. Chub Toad was one of the few survivors. He came forth from the rubble and told Hugh that during the night, the king had been kidnapped by the Stone Golem, a soldier of Moulech, who wanted revenge for the killing of his brother. Princess Gabriel begged Hugh to go and save her father. He agreed and left for the town of Riddaltar in an effort to find Moulech's hidden fortress.

On the route to Riddaltar, Hugh entered the Domarth Desert. In the midst of the scorching dunes of sand, he encountered three large scorpions. The largest of the three, a blue scorpion, skittered forward. "To leave this desert," it hissed, "you must kill all three of us." Upon hearing this challenge, Hugh brought his sword crashing down on the scorpion's back. It pierced the beast's shell and blue blood spilled onto the sand. The scorpion's stinger shot out, but Hugh blocked it with his shield as his sword graciously removed the monster's tail. As the life drained from his brethren, the second scorpion jumped forward and Hugh raised his sword to cut its underbelly. The sword deflected and the scorpion fell to the ground, unharmed. A shell of metal covered its body, preventing Hugh's sword from piercing the monster's skin.

As the two giant arachnids began to close in on the hero, Hugh considered his options. The sword was useless, and the only other weapon in his possession was the silver harp that King Peter had given him. He pulled out the harp and strummed it once. The gentle sound sent the two creatures into a fury and they begin rushing toward him, their stinging tails shooting wildly. Hugh circled the beasts and managed to throw the harp on the back of the metal scorpion. After giving it a quick strum, he jumped back just in time to miss the stinger's blow. The strumming of the harp caused the two remaining scorpions to attack each other and while they fought to the death, Hugh walked towards Riddaltar.

The townspeople of Riddaltar sent him to an old man who was once a servant for Moulech, but had been cast out for

helping a girl escape from the demon's castle many years ago. "Seventy steps south and 40 steps east, deep in the mountains lays Moulech's lair." The old man said. As Hugh was leaving, the old man gave him a necklace made of onyx and engraved with a skull. Hugh put it on for good luck, thanked the man, and left.

Through the mountains, Hugh climbed, guided by his compass to Moulech's hidden castle. The door to the castle was over fifty feet tall, and it took all of Hugh's strength to open it. Before he could draw his sword, the Stone Golem emerged from the darkness and knocked Hugh to the ground with a single punch. "The man who killed my brother will not be allowed to leave here alive!" The Stone Golem said as he picked up Hugh and flung him to the back of the chamber. Coughing up blood and bile, Hugh stood on his feet and waited for the Stone Golem to strike him again. As the granite creature ran towards him, Hugh pulled out the book of spells and in it, he found a spell that would return stone to the ground. Shouting aloud, Hugh read the spell.

"Shining sun upon the earth, none can guess your breadth or girth. As iron bars do surely rust, so someday stone should turn to dust!" With these words, the Stone Golem stopped in midair and fell to the ground, after which, his lifeless body turned to dust.

In the dark, Hugh found his sword, but was disparaged to see that his adversary had smashed it to pieces. The shield had suffered the same fate. With all of his weapons gone, Hugh entered Moulech's throne room. "Come in, come in." The demon king Moulech said as he sat upon a throne covered in red and black velvet, richly encrusted with black gems. Moulech's long black fingernails ran across the edge of the great chair. A fanged mouth and pale blue skin could be seen in the dimly lit room. "Death awaits thee," the master of evil told him.

Two knights, both wearing full suits of armor came towards Hugh from his left and his right. He jumped to the ceiling and grabbed onto a rafter. The two knights collided with

each other as Hugh dropped safely to the floor. Unscathed, he quickly picked up the knight's sword and shield and stood before Moulech's throne. "Skilled, intelligent, resourceful—I could use a soldier like you. For three thousand years, I have dwelt in these mountains, waiting for the moment when I could unleash my evil minions and come forth to rule the world. It was only your ancestor, Eric, and his ancestors before him, who kept my legions at bay. None of them were strong enough to find and defeat me—none but you, that is. With a warrior like you at my side, our armies could conquer the forces of light and destroy all that is good. Finally, the age of Moulech is at hand! Will you join me and live a life of darkness with immortality as your reward?"

Upon hearing this, Hugh laughed and swung his sword at the demon king. The sword hit its target, but much to Hugh's surprise, it was deflected by Moulech's skin. "What piece of armor is this," he asked himself.

"No armor," Moulech said as he rose from his chair, "your sword cannot pierce my flesh. Now I will destroy you and then bring ruin upon the whole of the world!" The demon knelt by his throne and picked up a sword and shield. Both were unlike anything Hugh had ever seen before. The sword was twice as long as Hugh's and the shield was the length of Moulech's body, and mirrored so Hugh could see his own battle-ravaged body.

Moulech brought his long sword down on Hugh, crushing the shield he had taken from the dead knight. Hugh rolled behind Moulech and knocked the sword out of his hand, but the demon swung around and threw Hugh to the ground. Moulech raised his shield high above his horned head as the hero lay helpless on the floor. "You should have stayed in your own kingdom!" Moulech shouted as he brought the shield crashing down. Hugh raised his feet and prevented it from beheading him. In the mirrored image, Hugh saw himself grappling under the weight of the demon. Around his neck, the necklace the old man in Riddaltar had given him was pressing

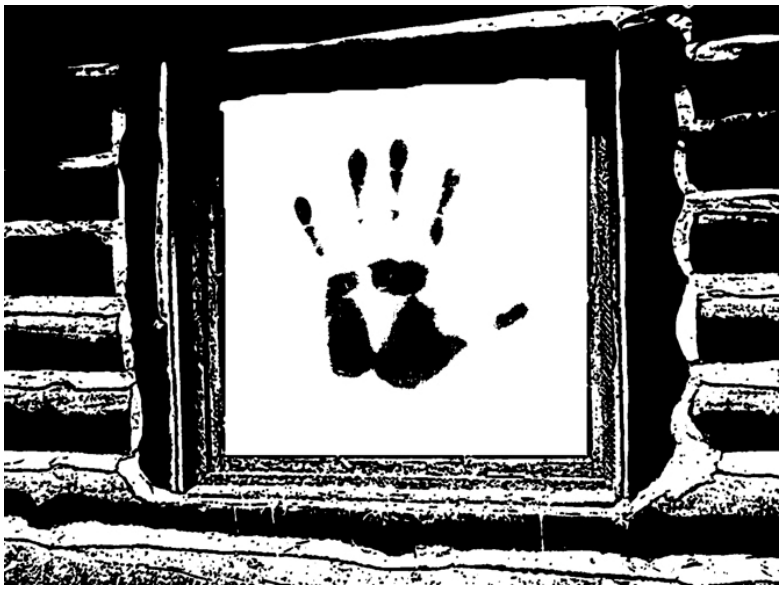
into his body. In the mirror, however, he couldn't see its reflection.

It was the cursed necklace that was stopping him from killing Moulech! Hugh pushed the demon away and tore the cursed object from his neck. Throwing it to the ground, he picked up Moulech's sword. The evil demon king lay on the floor of his throne room, begging for mercy. "Sorry, I'm fresh out," Hugh said as he shoved the sword into Moulech's heart. Twisting it, a plume of black blood squirted into his face. With the demon king dead at last, Hugh freed King Peter and the two of them returned to the royal castle.

When Moulech's life had been extinguished, all of the monsters plaguing the Kingdom of Lightenham lost their power and faded back into the mountains, swamps, and deserts. The people of the kingdom rebuilt their towns, and were once again able to travel freely over the roads and bridges. Peace returned to Lightenham, and all was right in the world.

Hugh was offered a knighthood, and the opportunity to lead the kingdom beside Princess Gabriel when King Peter was gone. Politely refusing, Hugh explained that as long as monsters exist in the world, there would always be an epic quest for him to carry out. Eventually, Hugh rose to prominence and formed a Kingdom of his own.

But that is another story…



The Bloody Handprint

The incident that I am about to relate to you happened before I was born. My grandmother told it to me, and I believe her story, or else I would not be retelling it now—it happened to her mother many years ago.

Our family was very poor and they lived in a cabin that was deep in the woods. My grandmother's mother was watching over grandma and her brother. Both of them were young, not much over six years old. Nights get pitch black in the Michigan woods, and all they had for light were a few candles. The nearest cabin was at least a mile away, so the whole family had become used to solitude.

My great-grandmother was idly knitting, keeping an eye on the children, when a strange feeling came over her. She felt almost as though she were being watched. Instinctively, she

looked towards the door of the small cabin. There, on the window beside the door, appeared a bloody handprint before her very eyes. I wish you could hear the way she told me the next part, for the thought of it still sends shivers down my spine: a voice, soft but terribly clear, kept saying, "he murdered me, he murdered me."

The next day, when great-grandpa came home, they pulled up the floor boards of the front porch and dug up the soft dirt floor in the area beneath the window where the handprint had appeared. Buried in a shallow grave was the skeleton of a man. His skull was caved in, and the general assumption was that a former owner of the cabin had murdered a peddler for his money. My great-grandparents moved out the next day and after that, no member of my family would stay in the cabin again, even though they had put his bones to rest in a proper cemetery.

On my grandmother's good name, not a word of this is a lie.

Season of the Devil

It was the 304th day of the year. The morning sun was rising over the eastern hills. It was a peaceful morning, for some people. For others it would be a day of evil, of madness, and of death. It was the season of the devil.

3:15pm

The wind blew through the trees as Sara strolled down the leaf covered sidewalk. It would have been easier for her to get home that day if her boyfriend Peter had given her a ride. She and Peter had been seeing each other for nearly two months; it was her most serious relationship in a long time, and Sara had considered the possibility that she might actually be in

love with him. Tonight would be a big night for them. Both of their parents were going to a Halloween party, and she was going to his house so they could be alone.

Sara was so busy focusing on her future with Peter that she didn't notice the foreboding mental hospital that usually made her feel uneasy during her walk home from school. Inside the hospital Robert Baker stared through the bars of his cell, watching Sara walk down the sidewalk—fixating on the gentle breeze that lifted her auburn hair off her shoulders. She was young and beautiful, and the sight of her strengthened his resolve to break free from the mental institution that he had been kept in for the last four years. His thoughts were filled with anger and escape. He had escaped once before, and he was prepared to do it again.

5:00pm

The armed guard moved cautiously down the long hallway, his nightstick slapping lightly against his thick thigh. He stopped at Robert's cell and looked inside. "Hey Barker, if you want something to eat, you better get out of your corner and come over here." The mental patients sometimes tried to hide from the guards and the orderlies, but starving them in to submission was usually an effective tactic.

The guard pulled out his nightstick, trying not to upset the tray he was carrying. He unlocked the cell door and began to walk inside the dimly lit room. A naked hand clenched his own and made him drop the night stick. "I'm real hungry," Robert said from behind him said in a low voice. The guard swung around and belted his attacker in the face, but Robert was too fast. He threw the guard against the bars and used the nightstick to impale him. "I'm going to get something to eat."

After the grisly deed was finished, Robert pulled on the guard's clothes and, swinging the nightstick, he started down the hallway, whistling as he walked.

7:00pm

"I'll be over at nine," Sara said as Peter hung up the phone.

8:45pm

"Peter, we'll be home late tonight," his mother said as she walked out the door with her husband. Their annual Halloween party always gave Peter the perfect opportunity to have a girl over. Sara was different from the other girls though; she actually had some personality and was fun to be around. He was ready for tonight to be their first time in bed together. It was going to be great.

9:07pm

"Hi Sara, come in."

She walked into Peter's house, the smell of her perfume enticing him, making him more eager than ever to have her alone. They made their way hand-in-hand through the kitchen and into the living room. She sat next to him on the couch. "Let's listen to the radio Peter," she said. He got up and turned it on, returning to her side and kissing her on the mouth while her hands slowly moved below his waist.

9:30pm

In the middle of their favorite song, an announcer came on. "Ladies and gentleman, I have just been handed a bulletin, Roger Baker, the man responsible for fourteen deaths in Marshal County last year, has escaped from Branberg Mental Hospital just moments ago. Roger was unarmed upon his escape, but should still be considered extremely dangerous. If you see him, do not approach him, but call the police immediately."

Peter turned off the radio and returned to Sarah's side. "Peter, you better lock the doors, that's only a few minutes from here." Wanting to make her feel safer so he could make his move, Peter locked the doors and grabbed his hunting knife

from the hall closet. Two years ago, his parents had built this house in the country, just outside of town. It was unlikely that a homicidal maniac would venture this far into the woods, but he couldn't be too careful.

"He shouldn't give us too much trouble," Peter said, putting his arm around her and unbuttoning her shirt.

9:30pm, elsewhere

Roger Baker ran from the truck he had just overturned, hoping to get away from it before it burst into flames. Further down the road, he could see a car heading in his direction. He walked to the middle of the road and began to wave his arms frantically. The car slowed down and stopped to avoid hitting him, not knowing the fate they were about to suffer at the hands of the psychopath.

The driver, a middle-aged man dressed in a cucumber costume, rolled down the car window and stuck his head out. "Excuse me," he shouted, "what do you think you're doing, I could have killed you!"

Before he could say any more, Roger grabbed him by the throat and squeezed. The woman sitting in the passenger seat screamed as blood poured from the man's mouth and ears. Roger continued to squeeze until the man was dead. The man's wife opened the car door and ran for her life. Roger didn't bother to chase her, but instead he put on the green rubber mask that his most recent victim had been wearing

9:45pm

Sara wanted to see if they've caught the escaped maniac yet, so Peter turn on the television. "Thomas Baker, the mental patient who escaped from Branberg Mental Hospital earlier tonight has claimed his first victim that we know of. Alan Nichols and his wife were driving home from a local Halloween party when Baker stopped their car and killed Mr. Nichols with his bare hands. Mrs. Nichols barely escaped, and said that her attacker now has a green mask on and may be carrying a

baseball bat. He should be considered armed and dangerous, and the police are urging everyone to stay indoors."

Then, the power went out.

9:56pm

"You better call the police Peter," Sara said, sounding scared.

Peter wasn't really worried, it was probably nothing; of all the houses in this town, there was no reason a homicidal maniac should choose his house in particular. "Not yet, wait until something actually happens."

And then, something did—he heard a noise at the sliding glass door, in the back of the house. "Stay here Sara, I'll go check it out." Peter said as he went to the back door. At the sliding glass door, he saw a man tampering with the handle. The man was wearing a green mask. It was Robert. The devil had arrived. When Robert noticed Peter watching him, he disappeared from sight.

Returning to the living room, the color had drained from Peter's face. He was scared, but aware that he had to keep calm for Sara's sake. "He's out there, Sara. He was at the back door, trying to get inside. Get the phone and call the police. I'll watch the windows for him."

Still holding the handset, she looked at him with tearful eyes. "The phone is dead Peter."

10:15pm

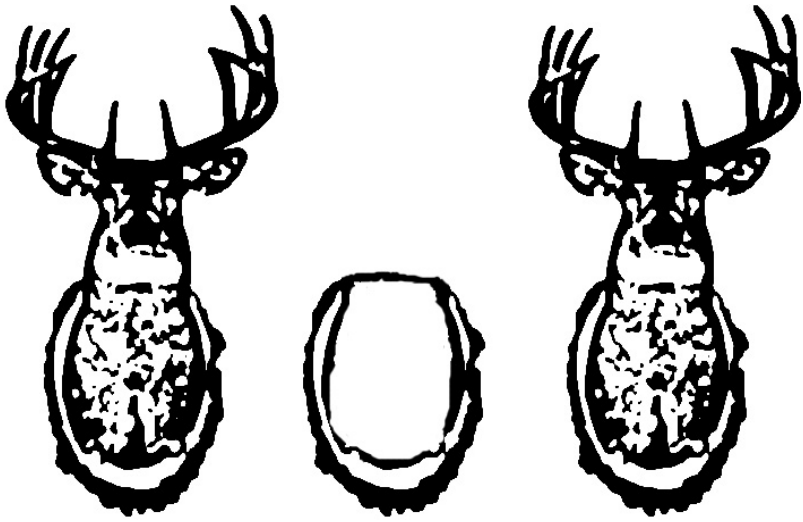
Peter stared out the window while Sara stayed on the couch in the living room. He could see Robert standing in front of the window, looking up at him from the driveway wearing a stupid green mask. Robert threw a large rock against the house that nearly broke the window, and then he methodically walked out of view.

Turning back to Sara, Peter suddenly remembered that the basement door wasn't locked.

10:23pm

As Robert climbed the basement stairs, Peter stood behind the door and waited. Robert reached the top step and flung the door open so hard that it knocked Peter into the bathroom. He now saw his attacker through blurred vision. Robert was over six feet tall, wearing a blue jumpsuit with the words Branberg Mental Hospital stenciled on it in bold white letters. The maniac ignored Peter lying on the floor and went into the living room, driven by a hunger for Sara.

Peter regained his balance and tackled Robert just as he was moving towards Sara. His mask fell off, and as Peter pinned him to the ground—with Sara overlooking—they saw that his face was pulled into a tight smile, and he was laughing.



Collection Complete

Carol and her husband Lloyd stepped out of a black car and onto the front drive of Lennard Heltizfimer's luxurious mountain home. She was more than irritated—the entire ride here had been made tedious by Lloyd's refusal to speak to her. Their marriage had been on the rocks for the last two years, and it only got worse when he found out that she was having an affair with one of her old college boyfriends. A divorce was almost certain, but surprisingly Lloyd had insisted that she accompany him to his boss's vacation home.

Six years ago, when Lloyd started working for Heltizfimer Industries, Carol knew that his job would require long hours away from her and their marriage would suffer; but they would have a high quality of life, and she would never want for anything. All of her expectations had proven to be

true, but Lloyd had become unusually close to his boss in the last few years.

Lennard—the president of Heltizfimer Industries—had built his corporation from the ground up, starting at the age of 22. His dedication to his business meant he had no time to raise a family or settle down. There were rumors that he was a homosexual, primarily because he had never gotten married. Carol was highly doubtful of those rumors, however, as Lennard was constantly hitting on her, and his eager eyes never tired of examining her body.

At the huge front door, Lloyd rapped loudly several times on its hard oak surface. The door opened slowly, and a small, bookish man appeared. Lloyd offered his hand to the man. "I'm Lloyd Richman, this is my wife Carol, we're here to see Mr. Heltizfimer." The butler didn't shake Lloyd's hand, but instead stood back and, with a slight bow, gestured for them to enter.

They were led into a large room that was filled with Lennard's taxidermy collection. "Mr. Heltizfimer will join you shortly," the butler said as he left the room. Lloyd and Carol sat on a red velvet loveseat and looked intriguingly at the menagerie. There were animals of all kinds: bears, lions, deer, foxes, snakes, and birds.

"It's amazing someone could have all of these animals in one room," Lloyd said as he walked over to an upright black bear.

"Well, I don't like them, they're creepy," Carol said, staying put on the loveseat.

After several more minutes of waiting, Lennard finally appeared in the doorway dressed in a maroon smoking jacket carrying a snifter of brandy. "I see you have arrived. It was rude of me to keep you waiting, and for that, I am genuinely sorry." Lloyd stepped forward and held out his hand. Lennard returned the gesture.

"It's no bother Mr. Heltizfimer, we were just admiring your collection," Lloyd said as he motioned his hand toward the animals.

"Yes, taxidermy has been a hobby of mine for many years now—both hunting and stuffing. That matter aside, I have summoned you here on urgent business. Business of the shipment."

Lloyd looked at Lennard with wide eyes. Carol got up and walked over to the two men. "What shipment? Lloyd, what is this man talking about?" A smile came over Lennard's face.

"Oh, then she doesn't know?" Lennard said as he turned towards the foyer, taking Carol's hand. "Come with me, my dear, and all will be explained." She walked behind him with Lloyd bringing up the rear as he led her to the stairs. He pulled on the stair post and the middle of the stairwell lifted up, revealing a stairway beneath it. "Come my dear, into the darkness we descend."

This was all very strange, and Carol didn't like what seemed to be transpiring, but she was effectively trapped in this mountain fortress at the mercy of her husband and his eccentric employer. They slowly walked down the twisting stairway, and just as the last traces of light disappeared, they arrived at the basement floor in near darkness. Lennard released Carol's arm for a moment and she heard him walk a short distance away. She wanted to speak with Lloyd to ask him what was going on, if it was some kind of a joke, but she didn't want Lennard to overhear their conversation. Her eyes were slowly adjusting to the dark and she could make out shapes of what appeared to be people on the far side of the basement room. Perhaps it was a surprise party of some kind—albeit a very unnerving one. "Let there be light," Lennard said as he flipped a power switch.

Huge overhead lights hummed and buzzed to life, revealing everything that was contained in the room around them. What Carol saw horrified her. All along the walls was another collection of taxidermied animals, but not just any

animals—humans! Twelve women, some clothed, some naked, were standing on display—eternal statues more real than the greatest sculptor could ever create. Lennard walked to the center of the room, standing in the midst of his trophy collection. "Now my dear, you shall join them in my trophy room."

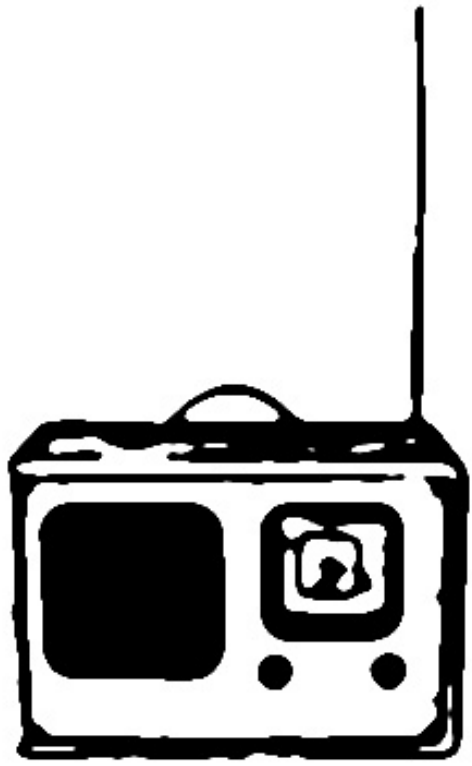
Carol turned to try and run, but the butler had come down the stairs and was now standing behind her. Lloyd appeared from a dark corner dragging a wooden crate. "Lloyd, help me! Do something," she cried in vain.

"Sorry Carol, but I had to deliver this." He pulled out a crowbar and began to break the crate open.

"What's in there," Carol asked.

"Oh, you'll find out soon enough," Lennard smiled.

After Lloyd had taken away the crate, he pulled its contents into the light. It was a small wooden platform made of rich, dark mahogany with a brass plaque on the front that was engraved with Carol's name.



Hearts in the Dark

"Hello?" Trevor set down the phone. It was the third time that night he had received a prank call. He walked into the kitchen and opened the refrigerator door. Reaching in and drawing back a grape, he dropped it into his mouth and went back to his bedroom, sprawling out on the bed.

Trevor turned on the television and *Citizen's Court* came on. As Judge Wottner explained the details of a case, Trevor returned to his word processor and continued typing. "Hearts in the dark, that's how it starts, hearts in the dark, oh

what sparks," he said aloud, reciting the lyrics of his latest song. Trevor was a song writer, not singer—just a lyricist.

The phone rang again. He walked over to his bedside table and hit the button for speaker phone. "Hello," he said, but there was no answer. Trevor had been getting prank calls ever since he moved into his new apartment two weeks ago. It was probably just stupid kids, giving him a hard time because they had the phone number of a celebrity—even one as minor as himself.

Enough was enough, Trevor was ready to put a stop to their tomfoolery. "Let's see how you like this. I'm not going to hang up. Go ahead and try to hang up your phone, the line won't disconnect, so now you're stuck with me all night," he said and returned to his song writing. "Hearts in the dark, that's how it starts, hearts in the dark, oh what sparks. There's just no stoppin' when I'm dancing with she. Hearts in the dark, keep sparking with me."

"Aggh! I'll get you!" An angry voice shouted from the telephone.

"Sure you will, mister nut ball." He went on singing and typing. About an hour later, he finally hung up the phone and went to bed. As soon as his head hit the pillow, the phone rang. Trevor picked up the receiver. "Hello?" There was no answer. "Look, I don't have time for this, I have to go now."

The voice on the other end broke into raspy singing. "Hearts in the dark, that's how it starts, hearts in the dark, oh what sparks." Then, a dial tone. Trevor was glad to be rid of the prank caller and hung up the phone.

A few months later, he was in the park, reading a book and enjoying the day. An old couple walked by him, and then a man with a small dog. It was just another day in the park. Trevor's song had not been produced yet, because he was trying to put together a series of songs before selling them to a record company.

Out of nowhere, he heard something. A man's voice was singing, *Hearts in the dark, that's how it starts, hearts in*

the dark, oh what sparks. Trevor threw his book on the ground and ran in the direction of the voice. It was payback time. He stopped running and came up behind a shrub; the man who was singing was behind it. Crouching down, ready to pounce, Trevor jumped out from his hiding place and grabbed a middle-aged woman who had been sitting on the ground eating a sandwich.

The woman was so shocked that she screamed, and Trevor couldn't get her to be quiet. She got up and ran away from him, horrified. *Hearts in the dark, hearts in the dark-* Trevor looked around, and there, on the ground (much to his surprise) was a radio playing his song. The prank caller had stolen it right out from under him while he left the phone off the hook. *Hearts in the dark, keep sparking with me.*

A Dark, Snowy Night

It was a night like no other: a night on which a young man—and his family—would experience a terror like none ever known to them before.

"Wow, it's really coming down out there." David Engleson looked out the window at the falling snow. The ground was already thick with white from the snow fall three hours earlier. "I hope dad can make it home in this mess," he said to his mother, who was in the kitchen cooking dinner. David walked over to the beat up brown couch they'd had since he was six. As he sat down, he turned on the television. The news anchor didn't seem to mind all the snow, but that's probably because he was getting paid a hundred thousand a year just to tell people about it.

He looked towards the window again. The snow had already started to cake up against the bay window in their living room. The news informed him that the snow wouldn't be letting up anytime soon, and that everyone should "get the cows in the barn." Luckily, David's family didn't own any cows, so they could forgo that necessity.

A moment passed, and someone was at their front door, pounding away. "See, your father's home safe and sound," his mother said as she left her cooking on the stove and answered the door. Carefully turning the lock, she opened it to find a complete stranger standing before her. "Who- who are you?"

"I'm George Grady. My car broke down about ten miles back, and I was wondering if I could use your phone."

David ran into the kitchen. "Who is it mom?"

Carol stepped back and let George in the door. "David, this is Mister Grady. His car broke down and he'd like to use our phone."

"Oh, do you want me to take a look at it?" David said, stepping closer to him.

George held the phone against his face. "No, I'll just call a truck."

Persistent, and genuinely desiring to help the waylaid stranger, David continued to offer his assistance. "Are you sure, I'm real good with cars, I'll just grab my coat and we'll go."

George slammed the phone back in its cradle. "No, I'm sorry, but you're not going anywhere!"

Carol stepped back from the stranger and closer to her son's side. George slowly advanced on them. "Neither one of you are leaving this house."

Not one to take a threat lightly, David stepped closer to him and began shouting. "What the hell? Listen psycho, you're leaving now!" He began to raise his fist, but George pulled out a revolver and pointed it towards him.

"I don't think so. Now, why don't you two go into the living room and turn on the T.V." They did as he instructed. The news was already on.

"Moments ago, here at York Mental Hospital, one of the patients, George Grady, killed six guards and then escaped with one of the guard's guns." Carol and David both looked at their captor.

"I guess that's you, huh," David quipped wryly. George slapped him in the face with the gun and told him to be quiet; he then turned off the T.V. and took David through the kitchen and out into the back yard. Carol couldn't see them, but she heard the kitchen door slam shut. Once George was gone, she walked over to the phone and set her hand on the cool, black plastic. She slowly lifted the receiver off the base and put it to her ear.

Outside, George was dragging David to the barn behind the house, taunting and yelling at him the entire way. He stopped and pistol whipped him again, leaving a huge red mark on the side of David's boyish face. "Let's go," George said, standing over him.

At the mouth of the barn, there was an axe stuck in a large wood stump. Next to it was the wood pile he and his father had made last September. Sixteen across, twenty two long, but a few had become disheveled over the past year. George swung David around to the log pile and pushed him down on it. "Don't go anywhere," George said, putting the gun into the front pocket of his jeans as he opened the barn door.

Three feet of snow blocked the doorway. George kicked away the white powder and the door finally started to open. David slowly picked up one of the loose logs behind his back and raised it high above his head, bringing it down on George's exposed head. He was knocked to the ground, and laid there unconscious.

In the house, Carol had the phone to her ear. She had been waiting hopefully for a dial tone for several minutes, but now it was apparent that the madman had cut the phone line before coming into their house. She set the phone back on its

base and just stood there, listening to the quiet stillness of the snowy night.

David slowly and carefully removed the gun from George's pocket and slid it into his own. He then opened the barn door, and dragged his limp body into the empty barn. David set him down and left, locking the door, and quickly checking to make sure there was no way George could escape the improvised prison.

Looking out the window, Carol could see a figure trodding through the snow. She knew that George had either locked David in the barn, or else killed him. She picked up a knife from the kitchen and hid behind the front door, ready to give Mister Grady the surprise of his life. As David opened the door, he shouted, "Mom, it's me!"

Carol came out from her hiding spot. "Oh, thank God, I thought he killed you," she said, fighting back tears.

David showed her the gun. "No, I got him first. He's still alive, but I locked him in the barn." He set the gun next to the knife which was now on the kitchen table. "Did you call the police?"

"I tried, but he cut the phone lines. I wish your father would get home." David took his mother into the living room and sat down with her on the couch.

"I'm sure he'll be home in a few hours. We can just wait until the snow stops and then we can all try to get into town to notify the police."

Carol started to cry. "I just don't know if we'll be safe with that madman out there."

Outside, the barn door started to open and George's blood-stained hand emerged into the night. He brought his hand back inside and started to push on the door. The snow was piled high against it, but despite David's best efforts he had not actually locked the door. It would take a while, but eventually George would find a way out, and take care of that kid, and then finish off his mother.

CRACK! The barn door hinges snapped off the rotted wood frame. "I'm out baby, I'm out!" George said as he grabbed the axe that was firmly embedded in the wood stump. "It's time to clean some house."

David ran to the kitchen door and peered into the darkness. He thought he might have heard something out there, but it was probably nothing. His mother called to him, "David, what are you doing honey?" He went back into the living room and assured her that nothing was wrong.

Axe in hand, George started walking towards the house. He reached the basement door, grabbed the door handle and started down into the dark, damp basement.

"David, did you hear that?" Carol asked.

The sound seemed to be getting closer to the house. David went to the kitchen and picked up the gun. "Mom, I'm going outside to see what that was. Come get the knife, just in case that psycho made it out of the barn." Just as David stepped out of the house, Carol thought she heard someone on the basement stairs. George was standing patiently at the top step, waiting for her to open the door. Instead, she ran to the basement door and slipped the dead-bolt into place. George heard this happen and decided to play with his victim before he killed her.

"Hello Carol, can David come out and play?" he said. She let out a terrible scream in response. "I guess that's a no." George let the axe fly into the door, sending it crashing through the wood. Carol screamed again. He brought the axe up, and down. Up and down. Over and over again, echoed by the sound of Carol's screams until the door was chipped away enough that George could get his hand through and unlock it. Carol ran over to the kitchen table and picked up the knife, just as George's hand slipped opened the dead-bolt.

Out by the barn, David could hear his mother screaming, and then noticed the faint footprints—already covered by the heavy snow—leading to the basement entrance. He started running towards the house as fast as he could through the snow,

swearing to himself that he would get there before the psycho killed his mother.

"I'm gonna kill you Carol, and then I'm gonna chop you up into little pieces." George raised the axe above his head, ready to bring it crashing down into Carol's skull. David could see him through the window and ran into the house with the gun, ready to kill him. Bursting through the door, David fired the gun and hit George in the left shoulder, wounding him. Despite his obvious pain, George swung the axe at David's hand, chopping it off and sending the gun flying across the room.

"My hand! My hand!" David screamed through a haze of pain. Blood ran from the open wound to the floor like a faucet had been turned on. Carol went to her son's side with a towel and tried to apply pressure to the stump without causing him too much pain. As George raised the axe again, Carol thought she heard the sound of a car approaching. A set of headlights appeared in the driveway and the motor stopped in front of the kitchen door. George lowered the axe to his feet and stood behind the door, waiting for it to open.

"Don't you make a sound, or I'll kill your little boy right now and worry about your husband later." Carol tried to stop crying, as David tried to keep from screaming.

Her husband's name was Bill, and he was on the front porch, trying to find his key. George waited silently in the dark, listening to the whimpers of his victims, ready to kill the family patriarch and then finish them off.

The key slid into the lock as Bill slowly turned the knob. All of the lights were off, and he was trying to be quiet because he didn't want to wake Carol or David. As the door opened, Carol screamed and George swiftly brought the axe down into Bill's heart. He let out a horrifying howl as his beating heart pumped a fountain of blood into the kitchen, then his lifeless body fell to the ground with the axe stuck between his ribs.

Now seething with anger and pain, George picked David up and threw him on the couch, leaving a trail of blood from the

kitchen to the living room. Carol followed him, trying not to look at Bill's dead body. There on the floor beside Bill's body was the gun—which George hadn't seen in his rage. She bent down and picked it up, pointing it at George's head.

"You've terrorized my family for long enough." George started to laugh and swung the axe at her, it hit her in the side and she dropped to the ground like a sack of rocks.

"Honey, I'm home," he said as he stood over her dead body. "You shouldn't have been talking so much when you had the gun," George said to her corpse. "Now your son's going to die because I have it and you don't," he said as he reached for the gun which had fallen to the floor.

Despite his extreme pain, David had reached for the blood-stained gun while George was talking to his mother's body and he now stood beside the killer and pointed it squarely between George's eyes. Without hesitation, David pulled the trigger and blew his brains all over the living room wall. George dropped the axe and fell face first onto the hardwood floor. The night of terror was finally over.

We All Have Our Bad Days

Jack Pade, an American businessman, was in his office closing a big deal when the phone at his desk rang. He left the men he was talking to and went over to the phone.

"Hello Jack," the voice on the other end was Arnold Barber, Jack's boss.

"Why hello Arnold, I was just closing up the Stockholm account."

"Don't you even think about it, Jack. There's an even bigger client that we'll be managing in place of the Stockholm account, as you know our resources are scant right now, and we

don't have the manpower to handle both. Just tell them you're sorry, but they'll have to take their business elsewhere. We have to do what's best for the company."

Jack was astonished, he had been working on this deal for weeks and it would've propelled him up the corporate ladder. Worse, the company was downsizing again and he might never get another chance like this. As he tried to convince Arnold to let him take the account, his overbearing boss hung up the phone leaving Jack to tell his clients the bad news. After they walked out and his office door was closed, Jack sat at his desk, fuming with anger. Arnold was a greedy fool who didn't care about anyone but himself. The company would pay for this mistake, but first Jack had to make Arnold sorry for ruining his deal and jeopardizing his career.

"Hello," Jack said as he picked up the phone, "Whitman Hardware, I need some poison, something that'll kill a big rat."

The bell to the door of the hardware store rang loudly as Jack entered. A man appeared behind the dusty counter. "Are you Mr. Pade," the slender man asked.

"Yes, have you got the poison I asked for?"

"Oh yes, it's right here. I'm giving you a discount because it's a few years old."

Jack grew concerned. "It'll still do the job, won't it?"

"Yes, don't worry about that, it'll kill whatever eats it."

Jack paid the man and drove home to his wife, Adrian. Before he went into the house, he hid the poison in the glove box of his car. Now it was time to tell her the bad news, that he had lost the big account and would probably be fired before too long. She may have to get a job, and he will be looking for work—it wouldn't be a good day for either of them. However, the package that was safely concealed in his vehicle might solve all their problems.

After telling his wife about his bad day, they walked into the dining room and began to eat dinner. They had both been silent through the meal when Jack suddenly remembered that he had forgotten to tell Adrian about the company

Christmas party. "Oh, and by the way Adrian, there's a damn company Christmas party on Friday.

"But, darling, won't Arnold be there?"

"Yes, he will," Jack said, a devilish smile forming on his lips, "in fact, I'm counting on it."

Jack waited patiently for Friday to arrive, when it did, he took the poison from the car and he and his wife called a cab. When they got to the party, all of Jack's co-workers were there, including Arnold. "Hey Jack," Arnold said as his fat belly bounced under the pressure of his guffaw. The two of them sat at the bar and enjoyed a drink while Adrian engaged in a conversation with Arnold's wife. Now that he was drunk, Arnold was in a lighter mood. "I hope there's no hard feelings about what happened earlier this week. It's all business and as you know, business is business."

"Of course not, don't be silly. I know we have to do what's best for the company," Jack said as a fellow co-worker came up behind Arnold and smacked him on the back. As Arnold turned to talk to him, Jack saw his chance and slipped the poison into Arnold's drink. Upon detaching from the conversation, the gluttonous man took a big gulp from the poisoned drink and Jack saw his cue to leave.

"I think my wife is looking for me, I'm going to go find her," Jack said, getting up to leave; he wanted to get out of the party before Arnold died. There was Adrian, next to the punch bowl, talking to two other women. "Come on honey, we have to go."

"But why Jack, I'm having a marvelous time." She said, wanting to stay and enjoy the party. He started pulling at her arm when the unthinkable happened. A voice rang out above all the others.

"There's a fire in the back! Everyone get out! Fire! Fire!" They were already near the door, so Jack pushed Adrian out and the rest of the crowd followed. Everyone except Arnold, who was just beginning to feel the effects of the poison when the fire started.

From outside, Jack watched the building burn. Arnold's wife approached him asking where Arnold was. "Oh, I'm sure he'll turn up, one way or another," Jack said, hiding a smile.

The next night, Jack read the headlines of the evening newspaper which contained Arnold's obituary in addition to the story about the big fire. The paper said that firefighters hadn't located his body amidst the rubble, a fact which made Jack even happier, because now his family would suffer too.

As he finished reading the paper, Jack heard a loud knock at the front door. Adrian came into his study. "Are you expecting anyone honey?"

"No, why don't you go see who it is."

She left his side and opened the door. There in front of her was Arnold Barber's charred corpse. "Is Ja- Ja- Ja- Jack home," the corpse muttered. Adrian let out a shrill scream as the beast grabbed her by the neck. Jack jumped to his feet and ran into the foyer.

"Adrian! Adrian, are you alright!" He came into the hall just in time to see Arnold eating part of Adrian's arm. The sight of his former boss' reanimated corpse attacking his wife was too much for him to bear. He stood there in shock, watching the gruesome scene. When Arnold finally looked up from his meal, Jack turned to run but tripped on the rug. The fall broke his leg, and now he was powerless as Arnold started moving slowly towards him. The rotting corpse grabbed Jack and broke his spine in three places, leaving Jack's body on the floor, paralyzed, but not dead.

Standing outside Jack's house, Arnold's corpse watched the structure burn to ashes in the black night, listening to Jack's tormented screams echoing from within. "We all have our bad days, Jack," he said.

When the Dead Come Home

Death is nothing more than an incurable disease.

I was sitting in my living room when it happened, when they came—they, the undead. I was watching the news when the anchor got a very strange look on his face. "Ladies and gentlemen," he said, quickly gaining my attention. "What I am about to tell you may sound unbelievable, and it is, even to me, but the governor's civil defense office has just released a

bulletin issuing the following report: It has been established that an epidemic causing the dead to return to life is sweeping through parts of the state of Montana. Those who have recently died are reanimating and committing acts of destruction and murder." I froze with fear. There was a cemetery only a few blocks away from my house.

The announcer continued: "I repeat, this is not a joke. The local police are advising listeners to stay indoors for the time being, but have stated they will issue broadcasts via the emergency broadcast system with more information at a later time. If you have weapons, do not hesitate to use them, these… beings… do not appear to have any capacity for rational thought, regardless of what their mental state was while they were living."

I turned off the television set just in time to see the first of the godforsaken creatures walking down the street, coming towards my house. The police were on the radio telling everyone that undead could be killed by fire or by a gunshot to the head. By the time the news anchor returned, I had already shot and burned three zombies. You might think killing a zombie is easy, but it isn't. True, they aren't alive, but they still *look* human. They still *act* human. It's like murder. My shotgun was almost out of ammunition, but there were plenty of oily rags, matches, and fireworks. Imagine a horde of zombies running around on fire. Wild.

Through the window, I could see three more ghouls approaching my house. On the road, there was a fat cocker spaniel, and one of the zombies was walking towards it. The dog wasn't afraid because it only sat there, wagging its little tail until the creature picked the chubby, gold-haired dog up and ripped its head off. Blood began pouring all over the ghoul's hands. Two other zombies saw what was happening and slowly walked over to the dead dog's body. One of them took a leg and started to eat it. The other bent down and scooped out the dog's entrails shoving them into his mouth, smearing blood everywhere. The zombie who had killed the dog bit its snout

off and started to chew on it. I could see the dog's teeth being devoured inside the zombie's mouth.

A teeming mass of the undead were now trying to break through my windows—there were about twenty of them walking slowly around my yard. A few of them had tried to grab me through the broken windows, but they couldn't get through. When they touched me, I could feel and smell their greenish-brown rotting skin around my neck. The smell was nauseating. It took me an hour to kill all twenty of the creatures, but there were already more closing in on the house.

Then, in the midst of their low groaning, I heard a loud thumping on my front door. I looked out the window expecting a zombie and saw a young girl who looked very much alive. "Please, let me in," she screamed. She was a very attractive girl with reddish blonde hair. "Please, let me in," she screamed again, louder this time. I flung the door open and pulled her inside.

"Thank you, those things would've killed me if I had been out there a minute longer." I looked into her green eyes and tried to reassure her.

"You'll be alright now, Miss-"

"Weller, Abby Weller."

"Abby, have you ever shot a gun before?"

"No, I haven't," she said with an air of disappointment.

"Listen," I explained, "we have to board up the windows and turn this house into a fortress. Those things aren't very smart, but if we're going to hold them off, we have to stop them from getting into the house. Do you think you can help?"

"There were just so many of them," she said, trying to steady herself. "I can't believe I got away from them. Christ, what are they?"

"We can talk about that later, I just need to know if you can help me board this place up!"

Her eyes began to well with tears, but she managed to keep them back. "Yes- yes, I can help you."

The boards from my broken furniture were lying in a pile in the dining room. I handed her a hammer and a box of nails and instructed her to start boarding up the windows while I kept the zombies at bay with my gun. With her working steadily, and me helping when there were no targets, we closed up the entire first floor in an hour, leaving only the back door partially unfortified.

After the house was sufficiently defended, Abby and I sat on the living room floor and turned on the T.V. The news was on every channel now, they were all reporting on the return of the undead. "This epidemic of mass murder by the recently deceased began in the rural areas of Montana, but has quickly spread in all directions through the United States and parts of southern Canada. The source of this deadly disease is still not known, but scientists from both governments are working on a medical solution as we speak.

"When this bizarre emergency first began, we were advising people to stay indoors. However, the National Guard has established strongholds where residents can come to stay in safety. They are recommending that anyone traveling to such a center bring with them food and clothing to last at least three days. Also, anyone with military training should carry a firearm and will be asked to help with the defense of the evacuee centers. Stay tuned for a list of towns you can go to."

Abby's eyes lit up with joy. "Did you hear that? If we can get out of here, we can-"

"Now hold on. We can't just walk out of here with those things parading around the front lawn. I don't have that much ammo left," I said, bringing a look of disappointment to her pretty face. We would have to leave eventually, but I still wasn't sure where we might go—even if we could get outside to my truck, the roads between here and the nearest rescue station were probably littered with zombies and wrecked vehicles.

I looked out the window and saw a man running frantically towards my house. One of the zombies that was in my yard grabbed him by the arm and pulled so hard that it

ripped off in the ghoul's hands. As with the dog, blood gushed from the open wound. Despite the pain he must have been in, the man kept running towards my now open front door. He was about thirty feet from the front porch when he tripped over the stripped carcass of the dog. As he tried to get back on his feet, I ran from the house and picked him up. He raised slowly, leaning on me for leverage.

A zombie approached me from behind while another grabbed the man's torso. As he was pulled from my grasp, his eyes grew wide with terror. I fought off the ghoul who was attacking me and ran back into the house. I quickly realized that if we wanted to leave, there would have to be some kind of distraction to draw them away from us. "I think our best move is to get out of here," I said.

Abby's face flared with anger. "How do you think we're going to do that? You saw what they did to that guy. With ten or twenty of those things chasing us, we'll never make it anywhere." All through her temper tantrum, my eyes were focused on the can of gasoline that I had brought up from the basement. I knew we had to get out of there, and even if I had to carry Abby, she was going too. In my mind, I was developing a plan. If I could kill the few zombies that were walking in the back yard, then I could set the house on fire as we made our escape. I told Abby my plan, and we decided to wait until it was dark to put the plan into action.

Against the backdrop of the setting sun, I picked up the gas can and began emptying its contents on the walls of the living room. The two of us walked onto the back porch and I shot the three zombies who were slowly moving towards the house. We left a trail of gas leading away from the house and Abby silently dropped the lit match that set the whole thing ablaze. As the flames grew higher, we ran further and further away, waiting for the *coup de grace* when the three full gas cans inside caught fire and exploded, sending several of the zombies flying in the air. We left the burning ruins behind us and ran into the woods, seeking safety in the solitude of the trees.

After we had been running for a while, Abby wanted to stop for a rest. There was no trace of the zombies, so we hid behind a large oak tree and caught our breath. It was then that we saw a small cottage nestled deep in the dense woods. Abby saw it first, and asked me who lived there.

"I don't know. I didn't even know someone had a house back here. In all the years I've lived here, I've never seen anyone come in or out of these woods."

"Do you think they can help us?"

"I don't know, but we're going to find out."

We walked slowly towards the house, looking for any movement in the structure. I was about to knock on the heavy oak door when an old man opened it. He was balding with gray hair and his wrinkled face supported a pair of round eye glasses. "Who are you," the startled old man asked.

"Have you seen any zombies out here?" I asked him. This question sparked a weird look from the old man.

"You mean, the undead," he replied.

"Yes, that's what I mean. Have they gotten back here yet?" The old man began muttering about how he never believed something like this could happen, and how this was the kind of story that parents used to scare their children with. Once his rambling speech was finished, he asked us our names. "I'm Alex and this is Abby," I said, offering him my hand.

He returned the gesture and shook my strong hand with his frail, wrinkled one, saying "My name is Doctor Hector DeGovia, and I suggest that we go inside before we're seen by the undead." I put my arm around Abby's waist and we entered the small cabin.

Hector led us into a small, closet-sized room that appeared to be a lounge of some kind with a huge metal door in the middle of the wall. He commented that it was to stop intruders, but I found it difficult to believe that anyone had ever ventured this far into the woods, let alone tried to rob this feeble old man. As he continued his explanation, he opened the massive door and revealed a long twisting staircase that

appeared to lead to some kind of subterranean room. To my surprise, he then pushed both of us down the stairs.

When we awoke, we were both tied to a large post in the middle of a laboratory. "Let us go you psycho! What are you going to do to us," Abby screamed. The mad scientist slapped her mouth so hard that she began to bleed.

"If you shut your mouth and open your eyes, you can learn a lot," Hector said as he pulled out a gun and waved it in the direction of a large cage where several zombies were moaning and trying to break free. "I am the one who is causing the recent return of the undead. People laughed at me when I said a corpse could be brought back to life, but I showed them! Now a new race will inherit the earth, a race that will follow my every command!" He picked up a remote control and after pushing some buttons, the zombies in the cage stopped struggling and stood motionless.

"The radio said that National Guard troops were hunting down the zombies, but it doesn't matter. The virus I created is spreading through everyone who comes in contact with the undead; it just takes longer to work in a living human. Soon, every living thing will be just like these zombies and will be under the control of my radiation machine."

I knew that we had to escape, but if what he said was true, then there would be no point because the virus could never be wiped out before it infected the population of the world. Looking for an end to this, I started asking the deranged old scientist questions. "What about you, how come you haven't been infected?"

"Stupid, aren't you? Do you really think that someone of my great intellect would allow himself to be infected by his own terrible disease?" As he spoke, Hector pulled a vial from his lab coat. "Here is the vaccine to the disease I have created, and I am the only one who has it."

Now was our chance, if we could get our hands on that vaccine, we could literally save the world. Hector pointed the gun at us and released his zombies from their cage. Following

Hector's commands, one zombie held me while the other held onto Abby. "You'll never escape, you know," Hector said. "I'm too smart, and there are too many soldiers under my control now. I am willing to offer you a chance to join me. The world as you know it is finished, but the two of you are the only ones who have found my secret laboratory, and maybe you're the only ones fit to join me in my rule of the earth." He approached Abby, touching her face. "And you shall be my wife, the queen of the planet, ruling at my side."

"You're insane," she said, spitting on him.

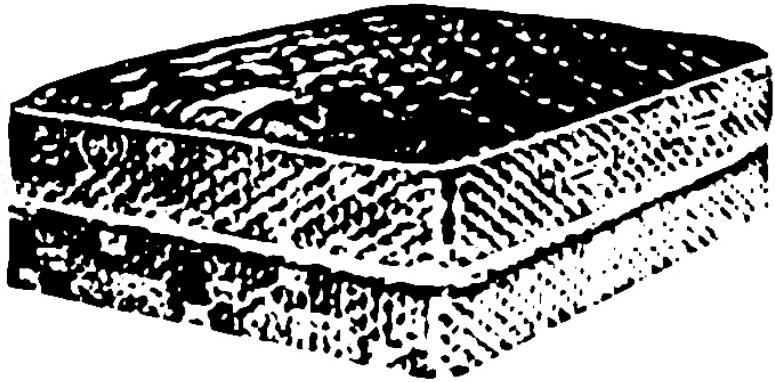
At that moment, I broke free from the zombie's grip and grabbed the gun from Hector. He tried to wrestle it out of my hands, but I shot him twice in the head. Blood and gray brain matter spattered on my clothes. The zombies had both let go of Abby and were now coming for me. The gun was out of bullets, so I threw the useless piece of metal at the approaching ghoul. It hit him in the head, but he didn't appear to feel the blow. As it drew closer, I picked up the remote control and tried to make it work, the controls, however, were not as easy as I had anticipated. There were three levers, six buttons of varying colors, and a large wheel. Each control appeared to have a different function, but all of them seemed to work together.

As I struggled to figure out the controls, my vision began to blur. My hands were shaking, and I dropped the remote control. Abby was yelling, but I couldn't understand anything she was saying. The zombies had touched me earlier when I was saving the man in my yard, and now the disease was taking its toll on me. The two ghouls that had been making their way towards me stopped short and turned to Abby. She screamed and picked up a piece of metal laboratory equipment, swinging it at the creatures. I moved closer to her, not in control of my own actions, wanting to kill and eat her.

Abby swung hard at the first of the two (now three) zombies and took its head off. The second grabbed her arm and as it started to bite her, she brought the piece of metal down on

its head, snapping its neck and allowing her to break free. Now I was her only adversary and I continued moving slowly towards her. She found my shotgun which had fallen by the staircase when Hector pushed us down into the laboratory. Still begging me to stop, she racked the shotgun and shot me in the head, ending my undead life.

After the gun had fired, Abby rushed to Hector's dead body, pulled the remainder of the vaccine from his lab coat, and quickly injected herself—she didn't want to go through that heroic struggle just to end up dead.



Mattress Man

The prisoner was being moved from cell three, where he had spent seven years of his life, to an execution facility on the other side of the state. He had been sent there four years ago—sent there because he had killed a few people a while back.

No big deal.

The bus was not exactly crowded. Five other death row inmates were already seated, three on each side of the bus, each of them two seats apart. The guard pushed John into his seat at the front of the bus, and then took his place behind a gate protecting him and the driver from the dangerous fugitives they were transporting.

John was going to die from a lethal injection. Chances were his death would be far more pleasant than the deaths he had given to the people he had killed—it was the least the state could do for him. Those people he killed, they were people he didn't like and people he didn't know. Even his defense lawyers found it scary that someone could be as psychotic as John; scary that someone was capable of the things he had done. He had done these things to three women, four men and one

child. The child was about nine, and that one he performed quickly. The others, however, he was not so speedy to dispatch.

John could remember when he slit that first woman's throat, how the blood poured from the open wound, how her hands clutched the bloody slash in a vain effort to save herself. John had killed her because she beat her children. He was a psychopath, but that lady had gone too far. The child he killed was one who had, at such a tender age, already started to do drugs. It sickened John, to see how anyone that young could do something so wrong. John did him a favor, there was no real future for that kid.

Drugs were also the reason he had killed two of the four men. He had been walking down the street and noticed two men shooting up in the darkness of an alley. John simply walked back, grabbed their heroin-filled needles, and shoved each of them into the two men's temples. The next day in the paper, John read that it took them four hours to die.

The next person was a woman, she bumped into him on the street the next night, so he grabbed her, shoved his thumbs into her eye sockets, and pushed until she bled to death. It was becoming easier to kill—so easy, in fact, that he would kill anyone who made him uncomfortable or even slightly agitated. Later that night, after killing the woman, he massacred a couple walking home in the park. An axe he had stolen from a hardware store was used to split the man's skull into two pieces, and the lady's into five.

The final kill would be his undoing. It had been two days since John had killed the couple in the park when he tried to kill two undercover policemen. He succeeded in stabbing one of them in the stomach, while the other one fired two shots into John's body. The first hit him in the shoulder, and the other lodged firmly in his upper calf.

All these horrible acts landed him here, in this bus, on his way to die. The bus slowly came to a halt. They were at an intersection, two cars were coming, and the bus driver was

waiting. John noticed that the gate separating the driver from the prisoners was unlocked.

He carefully raised his body in the direction of the door. The driver and the guard were conversing, and John decided to take them by surprise; he jumped from his seat and flung the gate door open. The guard reached for the shotgun, but John already had it in his hands. One shot went into the guard's chest, the other went through the seat and into the driver's back. He reached down and pulled keys off the guard's key ring and after unlocking himself, jumped from the bus, closed the door and fired three shots into the bus' gas tank. The bus went up in a mountain of flames the force of which knocked John into a ditch. Within a few seconds, he recovered and started running.

Three hours later, John was sitting in the middle of the Klochak mattress factory. There had been some food in the employee lounge, and John was finishing it—two ham sandwiches with a bowl of potato salad helped him regain his strength after the long run through the back roads that led him to the factory. Lying on a mattress, he licked his fingers, and plotted his escape to Mexico.

Without warning, the overhead lights boomed to life. As his eyes adjusted to the light, John saw that it was five in the morning. The early shift workers were coming in while he scrambled franticly for a place to hide. Jail was not a pleasant place to spend seven years, and he had no intention of ever going back. If someone found him, they would have to die—but it would be better to make a quick escape.

John ran to a pile of mattresses near the factory's shipping door. He cut one of them open, ripped out a section of the springs, and climbed inside, holding the cut closed as best he could. It was just a matter of waiting until the mattress was loaded onto the truck, and then he could make his escape and ride the truck straight to the border.

Outside the pillowed prison in which John was encased, the factory manager was shouting at the workers. "Look at this, you morons screwed up the button design! All of these

mattresses are useless!" John didn't hear this, as he had fallen asleep two hours ago. A few minutes later, he awakened. His face was wet, and there was a strong smell in the air.

The smell of gasoline.

One of the workers threw a lit match on the pile of defective mattresses and John Sewell screamed in the burning tomb that would be his final resting place.

NOTES

Curse of Highway 401

When I was about 12 years old, I watched a few minutes of an old movie from the 1970s called *Gargoyles*. In it, there is a scene where a large creature attacks a car driving through the desert. I thought it might be intriguing to explore the idea of the gargoyle as a psychological entity that follows us and "attacks" us wherever we go.

The Legend of Marrowbrook Woods

In my hometown of Benton, Pennsylvania, there is a little patch of woods near the airport (which is nothing more than a grass strip for very small planes) called Sleepy Hollow. Inside the woods, there is a deep concrete foundation where a house used to be. Growing up, my friends and I played in the woods all the time, and my mother once told me that the foundation used to be a house that was struck by lighting and burned to the ground. It was only a short stretch to write a story using those source materials.

All in the Family

The rural area where I grew up is sometimes jokingly referred to as Pennsyltucky because of its remoteness and the supposed abundance of inbreeding locals. One night, while driving home from my girlfriend Holly's house, I imagined my car breaking down and finding myself in the hands of a deranged, inbreeding family. This story was written while I was in high school as a tribute to her.

Hair of the Dog That Bit Me

During the early 1990s, the *Beethoven* movies—about a loveable but sloppy St. Bernard—were hugely popular with children. I wanted to show them another side of man's best friend. The title for the story came to me from Jack Nicholson's request to the bartender in the movie *The Shining*.

Night of the Abducted

Sometime around fifth grade, I became very interested in alien abductions and UFOs. The story was my way of re-telling a classic UFO abduction scenario.

Flight 237

The idea of Fate fulfilling its intentions was a theme that always intrigued me, and after I flew on an airplane for the first time, this story sort of fermented in my brain until I was able to get it down on paper. I should note that I wrote it looong before those *Final Destination* movies came out.

The Crypt of Nosferatu

I love vampires. Who doesn't?! It's very difficult to write an original vampire story simply because so many stories have already been written on the subject. Therefore, I decided to draw from an established mythology and re-imagine the circumstances surrounding the *Dracula* legend. Before writing the story, I did substantial research on Vlad Tepes and tried to come up with a way to realistically bring the "undead" vampire back to life, rather than just have him sitting comfortably in a castle for four hundred years.

Fortitude in Murder

If you notice some unusual vocabulary words in this story that's because it was originally written for my eighth-grade English class. Mr. Burgess was an interesting fellow, and he asked us to write a fictional story that involved an

unconventional murder weapon. "Fortitude" happened to be one of the words I was required to use, but it fit nicely into the title.

A Baker's Dozen

I began writing this story with only the concept of a killer thinking his victims had come back from the dead, but—as with the *Highway 401* story—make the real enemy the guilt lurking in his own mind.

A Sticky Situation

When I was in the Navy, I was challenged to write a short story about one of my co-workers (who shall remain nameless for fear of a lawsuit). I used the basic details of his life—syrup, chubbiness, and bowling—and spun a story around them. We didn't get along very well…

Stupid Bingo

This was kind of a challenge to myself to write a story by developing a plot based on a title. The title comes from a great scene in the movie *Throw Mamma From the Train* where Mamma is in fear of her life and intrudes on a bingo game by shouting "Stupid bingo!"

The Epic Story of Hugh

Hugh's story is based very loosely on the story of the *Dragon Warrior* video game for the original Nintendo, but was first drafted for my senior English class. We were required to write a story that contained all the elements of a classical epic. My story was the best in the class, and my teacher, Mrs. Wood, requested that I read it for everyone. Unfortunately, it was also the longest story in the class and it took me two periods to get through it.

The Bloody Handprint

As terrifying as this may sound, The Bloody Handprint is a true story told to me by my dear friend Jeanne Morin. She (and her mother) both claim that the tale, which happened at a cabin in Michigan's Upper Peninsula, is absolutely true.

Season of the Devil

Unsurprisingly, this story grew out of my initial fascination with the *Halloween* movies. My trouble in writing it was that I had no motivation for the killer to focus on tormenting a couple. Most escaped killers just want to get away and stay free as long as possible, rather than torment a pre-selected victim. The killer's love and infatuation with a female was what made him truly insane. The madness of love, if you will.

Collection Complete

I wanted to write a story about a sophisticated businessman who did things so depraved that no one could believe such a person existed. The idea that someone who is seemingly refined and powerful might harbor a hidden perversity is something most people try not to think about. However, we need to realize that sometimes the most horrific monsters are not those with fangs and claws, but those we never see coming.

Hearts in the Dark

The threat of plagiarism is the general theme behind this story, but it is loosely based on an episode of the *Amazing Stories* film series. I intentionally wrote the lyrics of the song to match the tune of a song found in that movie.

A Dark, Snowy Night

This was originally a treatment for a short film that I was going to make with my friend Jeanne and her family while I was in high school. The film never panned out, so I simply developed the core plot a little further.

We All Have Our Bad Days

If you have ever read any of the original *Tales From the Crypt*, *Haunt of Fear*, or *Vault of Horror* comic books, you will find that many—in fact, most—of their stories follow the same basic premise: person does something bad, person who was wronged gets revenge, people die. At the time I wrote this story, I was voraciously reading and re-reading the comics, and this is simply my tribute to them.

When the Dead Come Home

Here again, this was originally a treatment for a film, this one was for Helltimate Studio, an independent production company in Canada. The producer, a great guy named Alexandre Michaud, decided to pass on my idea in favor of something cheaper and gorier. I don't blame him—blowing up a house isn't exactly economically feasible for a small film company.

Mattress Man

Mattress Man was simply my attempt to tell a story of an ironic death. The prison setting was undoubtedly the result of my personal love for Harrison Ford film *The Fugitive*; and a mattress was a conveniently flammable prison, but not as predictable as using a coffin.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Travis McHenry is the author of several books, plays, and screenplays. He has been interested in scary subjects from a young age (probably too young) and enjoys passing on the tradition of telling scary stories to his sons. Travis currently lives in Southern California where he is an actor on the stage and screen.

To contact Travis, or learn more about him please visit his website: www.travismchenry.com